

## **Jonathan and the Berkley Y** **by Jonathan Lowell**

Many years ago, I recall my folks taking my brother and me to the YMCA in Berkeley. I was six and my brother four. Dad took us to a room that smelled funny and we changed into our swim trunks. Then we went down a long, tiled hallway to the swimming pool. It smelled of chlorine, lots of chlorine, but then we saw our Mom doing the backstroke and waded in to join her. The water was warm and we liked it. We went to family swim often on Friday nights for a few years after that. True, I never became a Michael Phelps, but I did learn some basic swimming strokes that have served me well over the years, and we met several other kids our ages. I also recall that there was a color TV in the lobby that I liked to watch after swimming, as we only had a black and white set at home where we were limited to an hour of watching each day.

As the family swim was a success, a couple of years later my folks signed me up to spend a week at Camp Gualala, our local Y's summer camp. I recall we ate in a cafeteria made of logs, and slept in bunk beds in little cabins. We sang around a campfire, went for (short) hikes to study nature, and made artsy things out of pine cones. We also had to perform chores, keeping our cabins clean and assisting with setting the tables and busing the dishes. And, thanks to my earlier swimming experience, I did fine navigating the (very cold!) river. My brother joined me at camp when I returned the second year. Recalling the experience over the holidays recently, he said it was a bit like Lord of the Flies with a bunch of inner city kids left to fend for themselves in the woods. Yet, his youngest daughter was quick to point out that he had sent her and her sister to summer camp a few years ago, and they loved it. We talked some more and my brother admitted Y camp was actually pretty good after all.

When I was in high school some friends invited me to join them at Youth and Government. I didn't really know what they were talking about, but I wanted to be cool and fit in, so I tagged along. Turns out the meeting was held at the Y with the color TV in the lobby (and we still didn't have a color set at home), so I immediately felt comfortable. But, it wasn't the TV that captured my attention, but rather the fun we had at Youth and Government. We were charged with coming up with bills to sponsor in the model legislature. It was the 1970's in Berkeley and we came up with some rather controversial issues for our bills to address. (Funny, the more things change, the more they stay the same, as the subjects of our bills are still controversial today.) What was fun for me was discussing important issues with friends and then working together to write up what we agreed upon. Sometimes this wasn't easy for a group of 15 to 17 year olds, but somehow we did it. One of my friends ran for the office of governor and won. A year later I ran for state office, too. (And, yes, I won.)

I forgot about Youth and Government as I grew older, or, at least, didn't think about it consciously. Yet, in college I studied politics. Then I went to law school. And after that, I ended up working for a city... and my duties included drafting legislation for adoption by the city council. Twenty five years later, I am still working for a city, the City of San Luis Obispo, and my duties include drafting legislation for adoption by the City Council. And, it is still fun to discuss important issues with the Mayor, City Council members and co-workers (all of whom I also consider my friends), and then to work together to write up what we agree upon.

And today, just like 30 plus years ago, the work I do isn't always easy, but I get it done. And, I now realize I must credit the YMCA and its programs, in part, for helping me to learn how to be responsible, to work with others to accomplish common goals, and to be a productive part of the community around me.