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A LOS ALTOS TOWN CRIER PUBLICATION • WINTER 2023

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



5 SPORTS

Four decades of sports-based play highlight Golden Eagle camp



12 FAIRIES

A childhood of whimsy inspires camp in the world of fey



18 HANDS-ON LEARNING

Continuity over time grows campers into mentors



21 ROLE-PLAYING

Teens create interactive camp for role-playing beginners to battle together

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ON THE COVER:

PHOTO BY ERIC DAVIDOVE. Campers team up to rotate through games at Golden Eagle Summer Sports Camp.

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Kool-Aid is out, gaga ball in

Four decades of sports-based play highlight Golden Eagle camp

BY ELIZA RIDGEWAY
STAFF WRITER | elizar@latc.com

The Lodge family started the Golden Eagle Summer Sports Camp 39 years ago as an all-day program located at Los Altos High School for kids ages 5-13. The play-based camp, which lets campers try out many sports rather than specializing in any one area, has also opened a location at Homestead High School.

Carly and Stefaan Lodge, a married couple who are the second generation to run the camp, form each group of approximately a dozen kids based on age, paired with a counselor and a junior counselor. Some kids come for a week, others for most of the summer. Veterans learn the routine and adopt Golden Eagle traditions, including a semi-mythical

record book for legendary camper feats. For the Lodges, it's a perk of the camp that it doesn't tailor itself to ultimately winning your kid a college athletic scholarship – it's a purely play-based opportunity for children to come home exhausted at the end of the day.

"That isn't necessarily a value shared by all parents in our community," Carly said wryly.

She sometimes asked herself if Golden Eagle should pivot to something more academic, adding a STEM approach.

"There's a lot of that that parents are wanting, but I also think (kids) spend all year doing it," Carly said.

In 1984, when Stefaan's parents first

dreamed up the camp, expectations were more straightforward – camp was a safe, sporty place for children to play together while school was out ➤





“I want kids to be kids, and I don’t think they know at 4 or 5 what sport they want to specialize in. Our camp is about being active, experimenting with a bunch of different things and making up games.”
- CARLY LODGE



of session. His dad, Nelson, had experience from coaching soccer at Stanford University, and his mom, Monica, was a physical education teacher at Los Altos High (she went on to become athletic director during her more than 40-year career in the district). Stefaan has continued several aspects of the family tradition – he’s now a teacher who has coached at Los Altos High.

The entire family got put to work growing up – Stefaan remembers addressing and stamping registration forms with his brother and older sister on goldenrod-colored legal-size paper. His mother ran the behind-the-scenes

logistics while his father established game-play and the much-anticipated Friday tournaments. Stefaan had stepped into a coaching role himself after graduating from college when he met Carly. He said the camp was such a huge part of his life that she came down the Peninsula from where she lived in San Francisco to see what it was about. According to Carly, she had only known Stefaan for two months when she started observing him taking care of campers, and his affect with the children sealed the deal. “I was, like, ‘I’m going to marry that man.’ The story got told at our wedding,” Carly said.



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PHOTOS BY ERIC DAVIDOVE. Long-running Golden Eagle traditions continue each summer while the family-run summer camp adds new games to the classics.

Family stays the same, but the world changes

Carly entered the world of camp as a 20-something after meeting Stefaan and the Lodge family. Now that she is herself a mother of three kids who attend Los Altos schools, she admitted that “there is so much I get now that I didn’t get before – needing flexible cancellation, asking all these questions about our swim program; I’m a parent now and I get it.”

She reminisces about the days of permission-slip-free sleepover camp from her own childhood. In the modern era, camps run less on the handshake deal and more on emergency contacts, doctors’ notes and sign-outs with ID in hand. Prior to the pandemic, the camp offered swimming every summer, and, as of 2022, they weren’t sure if or when it would make a comeback, Carly said, acknowledging the increase in parental concern that she herself understands.

Stefaan recalled that some of the standard fare from the old days sounds almost outlandish in the context of 2023 parenting – 12-ounce bottles of Coca-Cola as prizes during the indoor soccer “Coke Games,” full-sized bags of Skittles and M&Ms, 5-gallon jugs of Kool-Aid. Parents have put an end to all that, though Stefaan sounded downright wistful about the lost art of mixing flavor packets, 50-pound bags of ice with water and sugar for a single, Friday Kool-Aid treat during the drink’s waning days: “I will say, my Kool-Aid was amazing. I didn’t put that much sugar in it. I had a whole system.”

“Things have changed generationally since we were kids. It used to just be about having fun in the summers, but I feel like with sports, the pressure has gotten so immense that if you don’t start your kids with sports when they’re 4 or 5 years old, it feels impossible to do it,” Carly observed. “I don’t like that – I want kids to be kids, and I don’t think they know at 4 or 5 what sport they want to specialize in. Our camp is about being active, experimenting with a bunch of different things and making up games.” ➤



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That doesn't mean sports have to become an either/or commitment for students. Stefaan remembered checking in with a club soccer player who brought a friend to Golden Eagle for a break from very demanding training.

"The whole design and structure is for play and fun," Stefaan said of the camp's stations that rotate through athletic activities with minimal direct instruction.

They've found that 40-minute sessions hit the sweet spot for exposing campers to as many different sports as possible.

"Even in the lineup, you are sitting in line chatting with your friends – that's where the friendships would be made," he said. "I had friends made there in camp who

went to different schools as we grew up, and we still hung out afterwards."

Sports at Golden Eagle don't always look like conventional basketball or soccer. Campers invented paper airplane dodgeball during arts and crafts – they get enough structure to have support, but enough choice to engage with what rings their bell on a given day. Because the camp cycles through seven periods each day, choice is paramount.



PHOTO BY ERIC DAVIDOVE: Golden Eagle sports camp includes strictly play – no intensive instruction, just time to be a kid.



PHOTO BY ERIC DAVIDOVE: Golden Eagle campers, grouped by age, rotate through seven activity stations each day doing a mix of games and sports, with a sprinkling of dance and crafts.

Game-play in 2023

Nostalgia for the games of a bygone past doesn't preclude updates that reflect Golden Eagle's values in a changing world. The camp has long since retired the game once known as "cowboys and Indians," not just because the name was disrespectful, but also because the game itself involved kids pulling each other back and forth across a gym. But large-group mayhem in the gym still proves a major highlight for the camp's older grades, who play capture the flag, suped-up dodgeball and a legendary camp specialty known as Norwegian kickball, played with a slightly deflated volleyball.

"Indoor soccer is a mainstay that takes up the gym for the first three periods of the day, and badminton is a huge draw – it's kind of weird how much," Stefaan said. "It's hard to find a good wrestling coach, but we have wrestling."

Older kids might do free-form arts and crafts such as lanyards and friendship bracelets, while younger campers work on paper-bag puppets and paper-plate masks. New last year was a gaga-ball pit Stefaan built after fielding incessant requests from campers who'd been playing it during the school year at places like Almond School, where you'll spot a pit installed on the blacktop. An Israeli camp counselor had briefed the mystified camp leadership on the gaga phenomenon a few years ago, and eventually Golden Eagle was sold on its merits as a safer version of dodgeball (players in the gaga pit propel a ball into each other's feet, keeping the action low to the ground). The name means "touch-touch" in Hebrew. Stefaan said he's learned to play, but he suspects his middle-school-aged campers would blow him out of the water at this point.

Stefaan said they still treasure "goofy" traditions like the Friday scavenger hunt – during a session last July, the kids had to search Los Altos High's gym for a hidden dime, discovered at the center of the eagle's eye in the middle of a floor's expanse. He presides as theatrical judge as each team's counselor presents their scavenger hunt findings, interrogating them to the amusement of campers as they make a case for why objects meet the remit. ➤



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“The whole design and structure is for play and fun.” – STEFAAN LODGE

The business of camp

Carly said they view Golden Eagle as “mission driven” to make the camp accessible to any and every child in the region. They closed for two years during the worst of the COVID pandemic, and since reopening have been experimenting with “creative marketing solutions” that lean on Carly’s skills (she has a day job outside of athletics in design) to help rebuild their numbers. They’ve tried auctioning off a “free camp for life” prize in exchange for friends and family referrals. They’ve tried flash

sale discounts. Despite some of the legendary Bay Area stories about camp sessions that book up within minutes of enrollment opening in January, many others are still working to confirm access to their borrowed summer spaces and will continue to enroll students through spring and into early summer.

“We don’t get confirmation from the school about our facilities rental until February or March, so we have to make a gamble that, ‘OK, we’re going to open,’” Carly said.

That means Golden Eagle opens enrollment later than some camps that book out in January – and interested families have to save the space on their

calendars, trusting that Golden Eagle will indeed enroll again for year 39.

Last year, camp recruitment looked like Stefaan, dressed in an eagle costume, walking around local parks with Carly handing out Otter Pops and Golden Eagle camp postcards. If you spot him traversing Cuesta Park one day this spring, you’ll know to say hello. They donate to school auctions and experiment with referral discounts and PTA-benefit promo codes.

The sports camp rents out all of Los Altos High, meaning it has expansively flexible capacity and has historically always had room for a few last-minute campers, giving Carly unusual opportunities to experiment with enrollment drivers like last-minute flash sales. She said they are increasingly concerned about how to remain profitable in an era when they pay hourly for every individual space at the high school, while also meeting their focus on inclusivity.

“All the camps are upwards of \$500 a week, and that is not accessible to families that don’t make tech incomes,” Carly said of what she observes in the local market. “We have an unspoken agreement that we don’t turn people down. We have an application and ask for proof of income, and I will pro-rate. (In 2022) I didn’t get many people asking for scholarships, but I would like to get the word out.” ●

To sign up for Golden Eagle’s mailing list and for more information, visit goldeneaglecamp.org.



PHOTOS BY ERIC DAVIDOVE. Each weekly session of Golden Eagle camp culminates in Friday tournaments, scavenger hunts and other community-building traditions.

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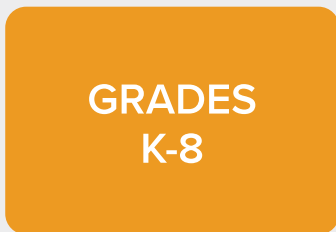


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Fairies are for everyone

A childhood of whimsy inspires camp in the world of fey

BY ELIZA RIDGEWAY

STAFF WRITER | elizar@latc.com

The call went out in late springtime – “Do you have a little one obsessed with all things fairy?” Children were gathering in Los Altos for a shady backyard fairy camp for ages 4-10, guided by Zoe Del Vecchio, a Homestead High School junior who grew up immersed in the world of fairy on Newcastle Drive.

Zoe, who uses they/them pronouns, mapped out a week of read-aloud fairy stories and art projects, crafting fairy houses and take-home fairy gardens, with a menu of fey snacks to fuel the work. Zoe’s mom, Tanya, a

credentialed teacher, provided support as needed in the backyard, but Zoe ran the show.

“The idea really came to me because as a kid, I was obsessed with fairies and had many a fairy birthday party,” Zoe said. “I built fairy houses all the time, and I had a little diary where I’d write to a fairy named Ambrosia.”

Zoe repurposed a shed full of leftover party supplies and activities for the camp, building on experience they’ve been accruing as a babysitter since age 12. They said that beyond enjoying the company of young

charges, they also like seeing how campers interact with one another – adding to the appeal of taking on a camp of half a dozen young people, rather than only caring for a sibling or two at a time.

Filling in the blanks

Last summer was Zoe’s second supervising a fairy camp, and they said the theme just doesn’t get old for them (watch for more camp sessions next summer). Throughout each weeklong session, Zoe builds up activities over time, painting pots,

building and painting fairy doors, and creating ancillary crafts (wands, other essential fairy paraphernalia).

Campers created their own flower fairy books, sitting around Tanya's blooming garden with colored pencils in hand to practice life drawing of the flowers and then imagine into being the fairy that would pair with each. The finished product calls to mind Cicely Mary Barker's oeuvre of flower fairy paintings, the first collection of which was published in 1923 – Barker's books remain a staple of modern fairy iconography. Fairy art and lore for children has changed since that early-20th-century fairy boom, when J.M. Barrie brought Tinker Bell to life and Arthur Conan Doyle investigated the lived reality of fairies, but common threads remain in fairy camp.

Zoe's camps are a safe-space for Conan Doyle-esque true believers. They recall hunting for fairies as a little girl after reading many books about the fey, watching for sparkles, purple-tinged vision, a darting shape just out of sight. ➤



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TANYA DEL VECCHIO. Fairy play in Los Altos includes bubbles and art.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TANYA DEL VECCHIO. Open-minded curiosity about the where and why of fairies lets individual campers flex imagination and find space for their own interpretations.



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PHOTO COURTESY OF TANYA DEL VECCHIO. Life drawing from the garden conjures flower fairies to life.

“Fairies don’t look a certain way, they don’t act a certain way. Kindness and being good to the planet Earth and taking care of nature, those are the messages we try to relay to the kiddos.”

– Tanya Del Vecchio



“As a child, you fill in those blanks,” Zoe reflected. They first received a journal for fairy correspondence for Christmas at age 6 or 7, and would write back and forth to Ambrosia for many years to come, building her fairy houses, exchanging trinkets and passing along the passion to a younger sister along the way. The lock-and-key diary interchange with Ambrosia remains unexplained to this day, though Zoe alluded with good grace (and less credulity than Conan Doyle) to the possibility of some human intervention in the relationship.

“Whenever we went to Shoup Park, we would build fairy houses; if we went to the beach, it was beach-themed fairy

houses with shells and rocks,” Tanya recalled. “When Zoe got the journal, I thought it was going to be more of a regular diary, but Zoe decided to write to their fairy.”

In fairy camp, Zoe continued the magic, discussing the unknown and the unknowable, as well as the speculative – What would a hosta fairy look like? What might a foxglove fairy wear? The menu for what a fairy might eat (subsequently consumed by campers) skewed American and perhaps a bit Pinterest-inspired: bread spread with nutella and doused in sprinkles, both ingredients that reappeared in pixie popcorn; strawberries with whipped cream; and a wand of fruit, topped with a watermelon star. ➤

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Goed campers

Girls make up the majority of camp participants, but every year boys have joined as well.

“I really enjoy breaking the assumption that all fairies are going to be girls and that only girls are going to like fairies,” Zoe said. “In my drawings, I try to make fairies more diverse, not all long hair and very skinny and typically feminine – I think it might be interesting to stray away from that. Interest should not depend on gender, and this camp is open to absolutely everyone.”

Tanya noted that it has been powerful for the female participants to see boys joining in, too.

“You could tell they had had the idea floating in their heads that this is more of a girls camp,” she observed. “But when the boys were pretending to be a fairy and flying around, it was very accepted. Fairies don’t look a certain way, they don’t act a certain way. Kindness and being good to the planet Earth and taking care of nature, those are the messages we try to relay to the kiddos.”

Fairy tales

Zoe’s recommended reading for initial study of the fair folk:

“Penelope Jane: A Fairy’s Tale”

By G. Brian Karas (HarperCollins, 2000)

This book features a little French fairy who Zoe thinks is very cute.

“A Fairy Went a-Marketing”

By Rose Fyleman (Puffin Books, 1992)

This book teaches children to love and respect nature – the fairy gives her coat to a frog, and relieves a bird who is in a cage.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TANYA DEL VECCHIO. Fairy campers painted houses and planted mini gardens over the course of the week.



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HANDS-ON
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STEAM CAMP BUILDS LEADERS

Continuity over time grows campers into mentors

BY KELLY YANG

TOWN CRIER EDITORIAL INTERN

COURTESY OF BULLIS BOOSTERS. Seasoned campers return as leaders to welcome a new generation at Bullis Summer Camp.

Bullis Summer Camp, initially launched in 2014 by a group of motivated Bullis Charter School alumni, became a meaningful fixture for many in the Los Altos and Mountain View communities.

The camp has undergone numerous transitions and adaptations – it was previously called Bullis Boosters Summer Camp – yet perhaps the most significant metamorphosis is the impact the camp experience has had on both its campers and counselors-in-training (CITs).

Hosting campers in grades 2-6, the camp – which offers hands-on STEAM activities aimed at stopping the so-called summer slide – has been a mainstay for many students who might otherwise not be able to attend a traditional summer camp. Through community support, Bullis Summer Camp is entirely tuition-free and staffed by credentialed teachers and seasoned volunteers.

Over the past several years, many longtime camp attendees have reached the maximum age allowable as campers, and have opted instead to return as volunteer CITs. Last summer saw the largest number of campers-turned-CITs to date, with approximately half the CIT cohort originating as Bullis Boosters Camp campers.

FROM CAMPER TO CIT

America Lascarez, a junior in high school, has been participating in the camp since first grade.

“I liked the activities we did,” Lascarez said. “I know one activity that I liked was when we built bridges out of marshmallows and spaghetti. The teachers are all really nice, and the activities we did were fun, so I wanted to keep on coming.”

The camp offered a fresh experience for Lascarez.

“During the school year, I wasn’t really studious,” she said. “This camp, I learned, but in a fun way, which was better for me since I learn more hands-on.”

Lascarez wasn’t the only camper-turned-CIT equipped with new skills. Estefani Domingo, a senior, had participated in the camp for three years prior to becoming a CIT. When asked about something she carried away from camp last summer, Domingo answered, “Leadership, communication, teamwork and team-building are all skills that I learned – multitasking, too.”

Domingo was a CIT the summer before last as well, and she reflected



COURTESY OF BULLIS BOOSTERS. Hands-on summer science projects give campers a playful way to stay academically engaged.

on how her experience at the camp has transferred to other jobs as well.

“Now I work at other different camps, and I’m able to engage with kids younger than me, be there for them and plan fun activities,” she said.

Angel Hernández, a freshman who attended the Bullis Boosters camp for three years, echoed Domingo’s sentiment.

“I also volunteer at other camps,” Hernández said. “All those camps combined is a lot of time spent with children, so I learned how to build up my relationship skills with younger kids.”

Despite last summer being his fifth involved with the Bullis camp, Hernández said he still enjoys the opportunity “to meet new people, interact with new kids and also learn new things. Even as a CIT, I get to learn new things that maybe I haven’t learned before.”

In addition to work experience, other CITs noted how they found their confidence at the camp. For Jacqueline Cordero, a junior, one of the activities cemented her passion for STEM.

“We did something with a stethoscope,” she recalled. “When I was little, I kind of already knew that I wanted to be in the medical field, and the activity made me more sure that it was something I want to do in the future.”

Esmeralda Calderon, an eighth-grader, shared how attending the Bullis camp helped her to be less shy and encouraged her to talk to other kids.

The CITs who were not previously campers also enjoy participating in Bullis Summer Camp. In addition to spending fun time with younger students, CITs learn patience, responsibility and to act as role models.

After spending more than eight summers at Bullis Boosters Camp, I myself am now a seasoned CIT, and I reflect back on those times as among my most meaningful life experiences to date. ➤



“LEADERSHIP, COMMUNICATION, TEAMWORK AND TEAM-BUILDING ARE ALL SKILLS THAT I LEARNED – MULTITASKING, TOO.”
– Estefani Domingo

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– America Lascarez

Not only was I able to form lasting friendships and make happy memories, but the camp has also been an annual summer sanctuary for me and many other attendees, a time where we can forget about our regular school responsibilities and just enjoy the camp’s simple moments.

Most importantly, the experience taught me the true meaning of giving back to my local community by witnessing firsthand the camp’s impact and forging new

friendships that might otherwise not have happened. For me, volunteer camp experiences like this one develop a sense of unity while providing a chance to see the world through a different lens and ultimately develop new perspectives. ♦

For more information on Bullis Summer Camp, which is scheduled the week of July 23 this summer, visit bullissummercamp.org.



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FLIGHT *of* FANTASY

TEENS CREATE INTERACTIVE CAMP FOR ROLE-PLAYING

BY ELIZA RIDGEWAY

STAFF WRITER | elizar@latc.com

Mountain View teens Liam Thijssen, 14, and Greg Pargett, 15, created a role-playing universe and wanted to share it with other kids, so they recruited players for a donation-based week of camp in a local park last summer.

Their Viking-themed live-action role-play experience (known as a LARP) immersed players in the fantasy world of Karnarok, an ancient land with its own internal lore – and the vision crafted on paper came to life with hand-forged weapons and collaborative action in the real world. A grown-up stayed on-site at all times as backup, but Pargett and Thijssen ran the show. They were already experienced LARPer but crafted the Elements of LARP week to stretch into running their own game, and recruiting a new generation of players.

Role-players create their own characters, and then rely on rolling a die to help assign backstory, strengths and weaknesses that will influence how they navigate the game. They carry out missions, and earning currency helps characters level up their strengths and bolster their health.

The blacksmith's shop relied on thick foam and duct tape, arming players to defeat monsters and battle enemy bands. Players start with games that offer training and safety – the art of live-action battle requires education, just like stage combat – but also grow into the missions of a larger campaign set by the game master. Pargett and Thijssen crafted the week to be especially welcoming for beginners who might be creating their first weapons and

magical items. They laid out expectations – LARP participants have to have some tolerance for touch and an openness to contact with foam weaponry – but they also taught the expectation that weapon safety keeps participants comfortable and uninjured.

“I want it to be new-player friendly and focused on team negotiation,” Thijssen said.

He'd observed the tension between collaboration and the desire to devolve quickly into stabbing each other, and wanted to craft a camp where one main party has to talk through challenges, rather than pitting good guys versus bad guys. Thijssen remembers being a young player who found it hard to face off against human adversaries and not develop a sense of personal vendetta over time. Inspired by the third-person medieval fighting game *For Honor*, he had read up on Norse mythology and decided to volunteer himself as the Big Bad against whom campers would have to collectively prevail.

Releasing frustrations

Thijssen started park role-playing in early elementary school, joining a LARP run by a local high schooler and ultimately participating in Christopher Melville's iconic Roekron community (written about in a previous issue of *Off to Camp* magazine), which meets in Palo Alto's Mitchell Park. He knew he'd really arrived when he aged ➤



into getting his own sword a few years later. Thijssen, who homeschools, found that world design helped channel his creativity and storytelling, and he has been able to work within the homeschool infrastructure to write out the details of his world for educational credits.

Thijssen’s mom, Mendy Luptak Thijssen, said she’d learned from watching her son LARP through the years, especially with Melville as a mentor, that building characters and going on very physical campaigns can safely release frustration and provide channels for big feelings. She thought it was powerful to see the work influence real life in positive ways, after initial questions about whether game-play that involves weapons and pretend violence might be counterproductive.

“Through experience and learning from Chris,” she said, “Liam and Greg designed a weapon that they play-tested to be sure that it’s safe and padded it so it’s not going to hurt when kids get whacked with it – they designed this cool Viking ax, and it’s very basic and unfinished (by design).”

Campers receive the raw start of the battle-ax, and get to craft their own handles, using parchment paper and duct tape, crafting stickers for the blade from printouts of different Viking runes.

Thijssen and Pargett advertised their camp among homeschool groups and the Stevenson Elementary community, and set the camp fee as a sliding scale suggested donation with the goal of making camp inclusive but



It’s a really nontoxic community; it’s not like a lot of sports where it’s about winning and putting down the other team. ... (Fellow players) are not actually your enemies, because they’re also your allies.

– LIAM THIJSSEN



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MENDY LUPTAK THIJSSEN. Two Mountain View teens invented a fantasy world and constructed a smithy so that campers could learn live-action role-play and create their own battle-axes.

covering the cost of the materials they assembled for weapon-construction (everyone got to go home with their weapons).

“I want them to take away that LARPing is not about running away from being yourself, it’s about being

someone you’re not,” Thijssen said. “It’s a really nontoxic community; it’s not like a lot of sports where it’s about winning and putting down the other team. ... (Fellow players) are not actually your enemies, because they’re also your allies.” ❀

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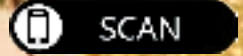
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