SHINING A SPOTLIGHT

A LOOK AT 15 UNIQUE CAMPS AND RETREATS

by Jen Howver and Leah Hill
ON SPECIALTY CAMPS

Whether a camp or conference center is looking to fill its calendar or reach out to a niche market, adding a specialty camp to the mix can be an ideal way to accomplish both those things. Across the country, we find more and more members are adding a specialty camp or retreat experience to their offerings, and we also have several member camps that operate exclusively as specialty camps.

Brad Ellis, executive director at Silver Birch Ranch (White Lake, Wisconsin), began finding unique ways to fill beds at camp when he started 25 years ago. He read a CCCA (then CCI) article that said the best way to start with a specialty camp was to launch something that would be a slam dunk — a father/son camp. After they had found success with that, Silver Birch Ranch added a mother/daughter camp and has continued to broaden their offerings to include a hunting camp, motorcycle camp, scrapbooking camp and adoptive families camp. “It’s a way to fill your calendar that fits your goal. You can’t run the business if you’re not bringing in income.”

For David Nelson, executive director of Camp Victory (Zumbro Falls, Minnesota), specialty camps became part of a marketing strategy. He was finding that “the majority of parents today have never experienced what I will refer to as traditional summer camp. They don’t understand the ‘Power of Camp.’”

Nelson found that when offered a summer camp, parents seemed guarded, but interested. But, “when I asked parents if they would consider sending their child to a Lego Robotics Camp, their eyes lit up and they became very interested,” he explains. That interaction drove Nelson to explore activities and programs that would interest parents and would be seen as a value. “Parents told me that they questioned the value of spending hundreds of dollars for a week of just summer camp, but they saw a great deal of value spending hundreds for a week of culinary camp,” said Nelson.

For Ellis and Nelson, and for all our member camps, it’s not just about the income (though that’s what keeps the doors open). It’s also about ministry, which is why sometimes something may be offered even if it’s not going to make any money — simply because it needs to exist for a particular group of people. Here you’ll find several unique approaches to specialty camps — some of which are wildly successful and fund themselves and others that draw in campers but require a board’s leap of faith and the generosity of donors. Maybe you’ll find inspiration to start something new.

We’ve sorted these into two groups: audience-focused and theme-focused specialty camps.
Adoptive Families
When one of the staff members at Silver Birch Ranch (White Lake, Wisconsin) was going through the adoption process, they realized there wasn’t a place like camp that would offer a retreat for families at any stage of the adoption process — whether first considering or having already completed an adoption. Upon learning this, Executive Director Brad Ellis realized this was a void that Silver Birch Ranch could help fill.

Last year Silver Birch Ranch held their first retreat for adoptive families and filled the camp. Ellis worked with social service agencies like Bethany Christian Services and Catholic Charities to promote the retreat to families who were involved with adoption. Aside from family experiences of worship and activities like a zip line and climbing wall, parents receive teaching and can attend seminars that address the unique challenges they may be facing in the adoption process or as the parents of an adopted child. Child care is provided while the parents are in sessions, and the youth pastor who is leading the children is also the father of several adopted kids, so he developed a program that meets the unique needs of the children at camp.

The families who attend may or may not have any church background, which adds another level of ministry to what they’re doing. Ellis admits that they don’t make money on this retreat, and it’s staff-intensive. But the impact it has on these families and the opportunity to present the Gospel to people who may not know Jesus is worth the investment they make.

Foster Kids
Royal Family Kids Camp (RFKC) takes place in 42 states and five countries around the world, providing an opportunity for foster children to attend a life-changing camp. It’s a unique approach that partners with a local church and is run entirely by staff members who raise their own support. The camp staff works with the Department of Human Services (or whatever agency in their state handles the foster system) to reach out to foster families. Each camp’s staff works to find volunteers (often comprised of grandparents, aunts and uncles of the campers) and a local camp that can meet the needs of their group.

Melissa Tenpas runs the Colorado Springs, Colorado, camp and explained that they usually take around 72 kids to camp for five days each year. Her team does the fundraising to cover the cost for each camper (as well as a mentoring club they provide for campers throughout the year). While at camp, the kids are treated like royalty to show that they’re special. Aside from typical camp experiences like worship, teaching and fun activities, Royal Family Kids Camp also has a birthday party for everyone (since many of the campers have never had a cake or a birthday card). And each camper is given a memory book at the end of the week filled with photographs of the fun they’ve had. Campers ages 6–12 can come year after year, even if they’ve been adopted. “Once a Royal Family kid, always a Royal Family kid,” Tenpas said.

Today 75 percent of the prison population is comprised of former foster kids, and 80 percent of people on death row were in the foster care system as children. “How can we not rally around these kids at a point where they are moldable and open to hearing about the love of Jesus and the promise that He can overcome? We want them to have that lifeline,” Tenpas shares. In addition to RFKC, many CCCA members have developed their own camp outreach for kids in foster care.
Special Needs
Camp Blessing (Brenham, Texas) recognizes that in their everyday lives, individuals with special needs are often excluded from group activities, stared at or treated harshly by peers. Camp Blessing shows campers how the world should treat them, and how beloved they are by God. Here they are surrounded by love, acceptance and fun all week. They are not excluded from any activity, as everything is customized to accommodate all range of abilities. Campers (age 7+) experience every activity with a single counselor who is within arm’s length all week. Beginning with a camp-wide welcome celebration where the team greets every camper with cheers (or quiet if they prefer), the week is filled with engaging activities. The 1:1 camper-to-counselor ratio ensures the safety of campers, the comfort of parents and the reach of the mission as close bonds are developed and servant-leadership is encouraged in these deep friendships.

One camper’s parents said it best: “After we had dropped our son off, it dawned on me that I had never been separated from him since his birth. But when I picked my son up, he was a new child. At Camp Blessing, he is a rock star, not the odd kid. At Camp Blessing, he is able, not disabled. At Camp Blessing, he is not just accepted; he is loved. My son looks forward to Camp Blessing every year.” (Editor’s note: For information on building a camp experience for kids with developmental disabilities, read “Something to Build On” on page 54.)
Single-Parent Families

Designed to provide quality time for families in a relaxed, fun environment, Pine Cove (Tyler, Texas) offers a shorter camp that is more affordable for single parents who may be facing financial challenges. The staff takes care of cooking, planning and entertaining so parents and children can enjoy time together.

Pine Cove wants to address the unique needs of the single-parent families while allowing kids the opportunity to cut loose and enjoy being a kid at camp. Each conference hosts a speaker to guide guests through God's Word and find ways to apply it in the lives of the parents and children.

Chelsea Connor, Pine Cove marketing coordinator, says, “We have a speaker come in for the adults, and the kids hang out with our college staff for their very own programs. It’s similar to our family camp in the summer, but crammed into a Friday through Sunday!” Families can enjoy camp activities together such as ropes course adventures, horseback riding and campfires.

The atmosphere at camp and the activities pre-planned by the staff allow single parents a much-needed break from being the one in charge of meals, fun and learning.

Senior Citizens

Ingham Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camps (Milford, Iowa) coordinate a retreat for folks 55 and older called “Elderversity” in the spring and fall. Through a partnership with local churches, senior adults can have a mid-week retreat to enjoy fellowship with other believers and connect with God in a quiet setting.

During the spring Elderversity, Ingham Okoboji Lutheran Bible Camps provide a unique element crossing generational divides. When summer staff arrives on site for training, they get to ease into the camp season by serving senior citizens at Elderversity. Each summer staff member is paired with a senior citizen attending the retreat. This creates a one-of-a-kind opportunity for the college-aged staff to learn from older believers and share their experiences.

These partnerships foster special intergenerational friendships, which Program Director Dan Antoine has seen continue even after the seniors have left the campground. Several staff members exchange letters over the summer with their newfound friends.

“We almost always hear from the older generation how encouraged they are that young people are pursuing God in a passionate way,” Antoine says. And by the same token, the younger generations hear how the seniors have dealt with a lot of the same life experiences.

Grieving Children

Big Lake Youth Camp (Sisters, Oregon) hosts Abba’s Child Camps for kids and families to process grief.

For junior camp (ages 7–11) and teen camps, kids can meet others who have experienced a similar loss. Monte Torkelsen, the founder of Abba’s Child Camps, says, in the morning campers “gather with a group facilitator who leads them through activities to explore a little bit more about what they’re feeling and how they can deal with those feelings.” In the afternoon, campers take part in the activity rotations and bond as a group.

The natural setting, a sense of community and a safe environment combine for a unique opportunity where kids can open up. “It helps them heal, and it gives them support. They talk to the other campers and share,” Lisa Geibel, one of Abba’s Child group facilitators, says. “It’s just a way for them to open their heart, to learn and to heal.”

Ross von Pohle, the camp facilities manager, remembers a time when two campers who had lost their father came for two consecutive summers. “They started with their walls up and had no capacity to talk about their loss. Now they can cry, express their emotions and journey through the healing process.”

“Studies have shown that grieving children are far more likely to act out and get involved in dangerous behaviors,” Torkelsen says. “By doing a camp like this, we’re hoping that through assisting a child in understanding these feelings are OK, and it doesn’t have to change their future. They can still make choices that are positive.”

When campers arrive at Abba’s Child Camps, many feel isolated and carry heavy burdens. After several days spent at camp, the campers leave knowing they have support, and as Geibel says, “that there’s so much more in life for them.”
Native American Communities

Camp Judson (Keystone, South Dakota) offers a camp experience for Native Americans from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. It began when some leaders from the reservation were looking for a camp in the Black Hills for their kids to be able to leave the reservation and enjoy God’s creation. They brought their kids to Camp Judson in 2009 but never came back because they couldn’t afford to bring them again. However, those campers made an impression on the Camp Judson staff and board. In 2012 the board decided to step out in faith and try to sponsor the camp for kids from Pine Ridge. Around that same time, a donor called to make a donation to “get kids to camp,” and so the board decided to create a four-day camp that was free for around 100 Pine Ridge kids, including bus transportation to and from camp, three meals a day, a T-shirt and snacks.

Tracy Koskan, executive director of Camp Judson, shared that over the years their staff has come to realize the plight of many of the kids from the reservation. Oglala Lakota County, where the reservation is located, is the third poorest county in the U.S. and has the second lowest life expectancy in North America (behind Haiti). Most of the kids come from broken homes and gangs, while drugs, rape, domestic abuse and alcoholism run rampant on the reservation. Teen suicide is four times the national rate. “With all the stuff they have to deal with, there is very little hope on the Pine Ridge Reservation,” Koskan shared. “At camp, they have the opportunity just to be kids, not having to worry about where their next meal will come from or if their siblings are being taken care of. Each summer we try to make sure they all hear the Gospel, know they are loved by Jesus and by us and that there is hope found in Jesus.”

Photos courtesy of Camp Judson
Equestrian

With a heritage deeply rooted in horsemanship, Miracle Mountain Ranch (MMR) (Spring Creek, Pennsylvania) teaches riders of all levels of experience.

“All of the horses at the ranch are trained by the staff here, so they’re here all year-round,” Noelle Miner, MMR team member says, noting some camps rent horses for summer camps.

Campers choose from 11 specialty horse camps, each with different recommendations of experience levels. MMR provides a list of instruction offered and recommended experience levels beside each of the horse camps to help parents choose the right one. Horse camp options include everything from horsemanship to English and Western riding camps and drill team.

Campers who attend one of the horse camps get two to three hours of barn time each day, as well as the opportunity to ride in the closing rodeo. Campers enjoy many of the regular activities of camp like cooling off in the pool and being challenged spiritually by Bible studies and chapels.

“[We] work with the Gospel message and how we can relate everything that we do to our relationship with Christ whether it be games or horse riding or bunkhouse time,” Miner says.

Culinary

At Camp Victory (Zumbro Falls, Minnesota), Executive Director David Nelson has something cooking with a culinary camp program that features a professional chef. “We are privileged to have a well-known local chef from the city of Rochester who participates two or three times during the week to help instruct,” Nelson shares.

A local church near camp has a large commercial kitchen and allows the camp to use it during the week. This, combined with the professional chef, gives campers a unique experience creating culinary delights like a real professional. Not only do they prepare several meals and sweets, but campers also learn kitchen essentials such as safety, menu planning, measurements and terminology. This summer they’ll create everything from chicken Parmesan lasagna to New Orleans-style beignets.

Much like other specialty camps, the daily schedule includes times devoted to the specialty and free time where campers get to play on the ropes course, participate in archery, laser tag and more. Culinary camp may attract a student who wouldn’t initially be drawn to a more traditional camp experience.
**Theater**

In the 48 hours before campers arrive at Camp Witness (Long Pine, Nebraska) for the drama/musical camp, director Glenn Smith is writing a dramatic play and a musical specifically to fit the number, ages and gender of the campers who are coming. This is after months of research on the topics that he decides their group, *6 Days, No Net Theater Company*, will perform. When campers arrive on Sunday night, auditions are held to determine who gets what part — and everyone gets a part. Monday morning rehearsals start, and by Thursday night the group is ready for a dress rehearsal. (Well, they may not be ready, but the show must go on!) On Friday night they perform their first live show, then they spend the next week touring the play and musical at churches and community theaters as far as six hours away from camp. Last year they had eight performances in eight days.

This summer will mark the sixth year that Camp Witness has been running the drama/musical camp. Smith has been writing the plays and musicals each year, and he’s been told, “You are talking about things the church doesn’t even touch.” With shows that have covered things like the Scopes Trial, understanding why God allows suffering, true stories of missionaries and even kids struggling with self-injury, Smith doesn’t shy away from important topics.

It’s Smith’s desire to “show the local church that the theater arts are a valuable ministry tool and help young people use the gifts and talents God has given them in a way to express themselves for God.” He explains that sometimes what their schools are performing is not necessarily appropriate, so having this option available gives kids a meaningful theater experience with a topic that matters.

If you’d like to watch some of the shows Smith’s campers have performed, go to YouTube and search “Six Days No Net.”

**Music**

About 20 years ago, Indian Creek Baptist Camp (Bedford, Indiana) began to host music camps as a part of their summer programs. As campers’ interests expanded, the need for a variety of electives gave birth to Focus Camp, which blends music, art, drama, sports and construction electives. Despite other changes, the camp has consistently offered music workshops since the start. Campers from sixth to ninth grade have opportunities to attend workshops and to learn new skills. Executive Director Jordan Morris says the goal of Focus Camp is “geared toward finding and using the spiritual gifts [campers have] been given and using them to serve the Lord.”

Professionals with opera and music degrees lead music workshops, and each session is catered to the camper. Kids spend a couple of hours each day with an instructor to explore their skill sets, take voice lessons, enhance music reading abilities and explore music theory. The camp is structured so the students participating in the music workshops can become part of the worship team during the week of camp. Students learn the basics of leading worship, song planning and how to use their musical talents for the Lord. Many alumni of Focus Camp’s music workshops lead or are part of their church’s worship team. The students’ passion for music paired with direction from music professionals equips campers to use their talents beyond the week of camp.
Aviation

At Character Camp (Pearland, Texas), Executive Director Arthur Davidson has been coming up with unique experiences since he began the camp in 1986. When a local school district requested that he develop a camp for aerial drones, Davidson pushed back saying drones were basically toys and were too simple to build a camp around. So instead he and his team developed an aviation camp. His team purchased a flight simulator along with a training manual developed by an airline company. They went on to learn how to build their own flight simulators to add more to their fleet at a fraction of the cost. (This may sound a bit outside the realm of most camp directors' skill sets, but Davidson was a graduate of the U.S. Navy's College of Advanced Electronics.)

Campers ages 6–18 begin the week by putting together a foam airplane and learning about aerodynamics and the construction of a plane. From there they learn to use the controls and move on to ground movement lessons on the simulator. Once they’ve mastered those skills, they learn to take off and are taught about aero navigation, and then comes the hardest step — landing the plane. When campers leave after a week, they have basically learned to fly an airplane. “The reason we teach kids to fly is that it gives them an incredible surge in self-confidence. When they figure out they can learn to fly an airplane, the kids quickly believe many things appear to be hard, but they could learn to do them,” Davidson shared.

Character Camp doesn’t have a physical property, so they take their kids to various camps in southeastern Texas each year, along with their flight simulators and a mobile computer lab. The rest of the campers’ experience looks similar to most summer camps filled with swimming, adventure activities, chapel and small group interactions. Davidson’s camps focus on building character and leading campers to Jesus. What began as a ministry that primarily reached inner-city kids in Houston has grown to draw in kids from all walks of life and all around Texas — and even a few from China last summer!

Hunting

If the location of the camp is right, a hunting camp can provide a big draw for an audience that might not otherwise attend camp.

Brad Ellis at Silver Birch Ranch (White Lake, Wisconsin) wanted to create a camp experience for hunters since he’s a big hunter and was looking for another camp experience that would reach a unique group.

For the past 25 years, Ellis has held a Christian hunting retreat. On average he has 60 to 70 guys who often bring their sons. Sometimes there are three generations of hunters attending. “Those people would never come to a camp unless they were interested in hunting,” Ellis shares.

At Camp Witness (Long Pine, Nebraska), Glenn Smith is part of a Special Youth Challenge group and offers a special-needs hunting camp. In the spring they hunt turkey, and in the fall they hunt deer. About 18 to 20 kids come with around 100 volunteers. “I call it a camp for grumpy old men,” Smith says. “They don’t want to go to camp, but they do want to help a kid go hunting.”

Guns are mounted on turrets, creating a unique piece of hunting equipment that makes it easy for campers with different disabilities to shoot. The volunteers are there to help line up the shot and activate the trigger so the camper can just push the button.

There’s no charge to the families for this camp, and Smith has seen fathers, grandfathers, drivers, guides and hunters come to Christ on these retreats.
Crafts/Quilting/Scrapbooking

Quilting and scrapbooking have become ideal activities for many women’s retreats. By stitching together work time, instruction, meals and fellowship, Camp Lebanon’s (Burtrum, Minnesota) quilting and scrapbooking retreats give women many options to create, relax and enjoy fellowship. Weekend and mid-week sessions in the spring and fall have opened doors for guests to come on days that can be hard to book.

Minnesota-based quilt shops are invited to join the retreats. They offer special classes, bring fabrics, model patterns and provide other supplies for purchase. The retreats are low-structured and highly organized for women to work on their projects while devoting time to new and old friends. Each retreat is themed with decorations, instructions and a Bible-centered focus that points women toward God.

The retreats are scheduled in a way that allows for guests to have lots of time to work on their projects and leave their workspaces set up. With experienced instructors on-site, women can take a class or join a workshop as part of their stay. At the end of the retreat, guests have a “Show and Tell” finale to display their projects before they take them home.

Writing

Glen Eyrie (Colorado Springs, Colorado) has been hosting a writer’s workshop for the past 10 years. Authors Nancy Rue and Angela Hunt facilitate a hands-on weekend in the unique setting that combines soul-stirring natural beauty with a historic castle. Meaghan Hart, programs director at Glen Eyrie, explains that because this is positioned as a workshop and not a conference, attendees choose one instructor and remain with her throughout the entire event. “It’s an intensive workshop, but one filled with lots of fun and group moments that encourage bonding among the attendees.”

During the weekend, Rue and Hunt make themselves available for interactions with the participants. There are significant opportunities for participants to learn from their expertise. One woman said, “I left the weekend encouraged as a writer and more learned in my craft, and most importantly that God gave me just what I needed during my time here.”

Jen Howver was once a camp kid who later spent two summers working at a camp in Michigan, where she met and later married her husband, Jay. Fast forward 20 years and now Jen works as a marketing consultant and editor of InSite Magazine. She and Jay live in Monument, Colorado, with their daughters, Noelle and Chloe, and way too many pets.

Leah Hill serves as the marketing/communications specialist at CCCA. Her passion for camp partnered with a background in journalism make working with CCCA a fantastic fit.