

A PLACE FOR HEALING

Stories of camps providing hope



Time spent at camp is always a wonderful break from people's daily routines, but for some, camp is truly a shelter in the storm. We spoke to camps that specialize in helping people heal. ▶

Photo courtesy of Camp Luther

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A Place of Connection for Military Families

Officers’ Christian Fellowship (OCF) is a ministry that strives to build Christian networks at each military base and offer fellowship for believers within the military. OCF has two conference centers: White Sulphur Springs (Manns Choice, Pennsylvania) and Spring Canyon (Buena Vista, Colorado).

“These conference centers want to become a home away from home for military families,” said Paul Robyn, the director of White Sulphur Springs.

“Because of the transient nature of military service, there’s always that feeling that families are ‘the new kid.’ We want to provide consistency in their lives, and many of our families come year after year.”

Because families move so often, it can be hard to get plugged in somewhere new every few years. “It can be difficult to find a home church in each new location, so we want to be a home church for military families,” Robyn said. “We offer retreats at both Christmas and Easter, so families have a place to worship during these special times.”

Programming is deliberately flexible because they want families to rest during their visit. “We strive to be a ‘vacation with a purpose,’” Robyn said. “We offer programs for every age group with solid teaching and fellowship, plus lots of fun activities to do.”

Military families face unique challenges that can make it more challenging to maintain healthy relationships. “We invest in biblical counseling training for our staff, and we strive to be a refuge for military families,” Robyn said.

One of the most popular programs is the Youth/Parent Adventure Weekend. “This program is designed for one-on-one time between a parent and a child, and it usually takes place around the time of a military deployment,” Robyn said. “It’s a great opportunity to build good memories before the parent deploys or to reconnect after returning home.”

White Sulphur Springs offers programs for kids of all ages. “Our counselors are all military kids themselves, so they understand the unique challenges that our campers are going through,” Robyn said. “Many campers feel relieved to have someone to talk to who can relate to their challenges.”

Housing the Homeless During the Pandemic

Alliance Redwoods Camp (Occidental, California) opened its doors to the homeless at the start of the pandemic. “We want to be a camp that serves the community,” said Jim Blake, the director. “We looked for the greatest need and then found a way to meet it.”

At the start of the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told the Redwoods Gospel Mission that they had too many people at their shelter. “There was a huge overcrowding problem, and they were told they needed to relocate 40 people to follow social-distancing regulations,” Blake said. “Because of the pandemic, most of our programs had been canceled, so we had room for them here.”

The camp is hosting these people through private donations, and they have applied for the government funds that are available.

They offer socially-distanced programming like Bible studies and Celebrate Recovery meetings via Skype. “We’ve learned a new way of doing things through this experience,” Blake said. “It’s been challenging, but people are learning and growing in their faith, and God is using us during this time.” ►

Providing Trauma-informed Care

Partnering with organizations to meet unique needs

■ by Lisa Olson

Even one week of camp can transform the life of a child. The positive disruption of routine and environment, the healthy relationships formed, the encouragement to try new things — accepting challenges and conquering fears — all work together to reorient a child's life. The new perspective gained can birth hope, establish a new way of being with God, changing a child's trajectory for life and eternity.

This powerful experience is a special gift for a child who lives in the margins. The effects of trauma on a child can create a posture of learned helplessness, where hope and optimism are dimmed, and possibilities seem few and far between.

Partnering with organizations skilled in trauma-informed care for special populations is a great way to open your doors to serve kids impacted by trauma responsibly. At Carolina Creek (Huntsville, Texas), we are fully aware that we do not have the expertise to design programs and curriculum intended to provide a healing journey for campers with specific needs. Nonetheless, last summer, 30% of our campers came with groups committed to serving kids who had experienced considerable wounding or loss.

We worked with several groups, including Camp HOPE America, serving kids impacted by domestic violence; CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), working with kids who were involved with the court system for various reasons; Operation Purple, serving kids from military families; and Angel Tree, bringing kids to camp from homes where a parent had been incarcerated. Our area's local homeless shelter brought kids, as did church partners serving ethnically diverse and economically challenged kids from urban areas, and rural poor churches.

Some came as exclusive groups, offering a program and curriculum focused on their particular needs and goals to regain wholeness. Others came as smaller groups to programs offered to all campers, either living in a cabin exclusive to their group, with a skilled counselor working alongside our staff or mingling with campers from all walks of life.

Our part-time special care coordinator's role is to work with each partner organization to understand the needs of the campers they bring. This coordinator then trains our staff to work with each group or child and serves as a liaison between our staff and our partner.

Our posture is to do what we do best, supporting our partner organizations to do what they do best. Humility is an essential element that allows for collaborative and effective ministry.

It is a privilege to know that we can responsibly serve "the least of these," doing our part to provide life-changing camp experiences for these worthy kids.

Look for partners in your neighborhood who might work synergistically with you. You don't have to be an expert in trauma-informed care. Christian hospitality lays the foundation, and our expertise in providing safe and exciting camp experiences is invaluable.



Lisa Olson has been in executive camp leadership for more than 35 consecutive years, serving at some of the premier Christian camps in the nation. Half of those years were spent developing and leading programs to impact the trajectories of children, youth, adults and families. The other half were in business development, strategic planning, marketing and fundraising. Currently she serves as the executive director of Carolina Creek. Lisa is the parent of four young adult children.

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A Safe Place for At-risk Kids

Eagle Village (Hersey, Michigan) provides a therapeutic camp experience for kids and teens who have been abused or neglected, involved in the foster care system or have otherwise experienced trauma.

“Many of these kids have never had a safe place to share what has happened to them,” said Eric Woods, the director of prevention and intervention programs at Eagle Village. “We want to give kids a chance to reflect on their experiences in a healthy way, and realize how those experiences are impacting them today.” And Eagle Village is a fun place to be. “We do the same activities that other camps do,” Woods said. “These kids need to have fun. They need to be allowed to just be kids.”

“While we can’t erase a child’s negative experiences, we can provide positive ones,” Woods said. “During our camp’s 50th-anniversary celebration, a man who’d spent time with us as a child 40 years ago returned to tell us that all of his good childhood memories started at Eagle Village. He said it made a huge difference in his life.”

About half of the campers that come to Eagle Village are referred to the camp by county and state agencies. The other half are children who are in foster care or who have been adopted by foster families. “In past years, kids had to be at least 8 years old to attend, but this year, we saw the need to welcome younger kids, so we now take children as young as 5,” Woods said.

In some circumstances, the entire family comes to camp. Families learn conflict resolution techniques and see a family therapist if needed. “We want to give the parent or caregiver resources to help them parent better. We put them up in the high ropes course and then coach them through it with encouragement,” Woods said. “Then, when their child is doing the course, it’s the parent or caregiver’s job to coach them through it. They know what to say because we modeled it for them when they were doing the course. For some, it may be the first time they’ve ever encouraged their child.”

Even if the family doesn’t attend camp with the child, they are still invited to come for the last meal. “We want to tell the parent or caregiver something good their child did that week,” Woods said. “We talk about the child in a positive way in front of them to affirm them and create the opportunity for the child to share about their week with the parent.”

Many of the counselors at Eagle Village are college students majoring in social work or youth ministry. “They really want to help struggling kids work through their challenges,” Woods said.

On day one, the staff at Eagle Village teaches kids that they matter to God and that they are welcome at camp. It’s a healing message for hurting kids. ■



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Diane Stark lives in Indiana with her husband and their five children. Her writing has been published in Guideposts, Outreach, War Cry, and about 40 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. She loves to write about the important things in life: her family and her faith.