

# BUILDING DIVERSITY INTO THE CAMP EXPERIENCE

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Lessons from one CCCA member camp





Churches should look more like heaven. If we are all going to worship God together in heaven for all eternity, why do so many of us worship Him on earth mostly with other people who look like us? ►



It's a question we've all heard, and maybe we've wondered how to foster more diversity at our camps or conference centers. Barefoot Republic Camp and Retreat Center (Fountain Run, Kentucky) is an interdenominational Christian camp whose mission is to facilitate Christ-centered relationships between individuals from diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

The camp chose its name purposely to reflect its mission of diversity. Their website says, "Being barefoot is a sign of vulnerability and humanity, as well as a sign of our brokenness. We consider our cabin groups [to be like] 'republics' — small communities comprised of kids from all nations who come together as a united family." During each camp session, each republic chooses a name that reflects the common ground they've worked to find and establishes a shared identity for the group.

After Barefoot's more than two decades of working toward creating a more diverse Christian camp, there are a few things we can learn if we're aiming to expand the diversity in our camps and conference centers.

#### **Define Diversity**

Barefoot is intentional about bringing people from different backgrounds together, and they don't just focus on race. "We can't look at diversity from just one facet," says Aucretia Carey, financial director at Barefoot. "That's one misconception people may have, [thinking] that Barefoot just tries to do racial reconciliation, but we try to look at cultural, racial and socio-economic differences."

The camp also has campers with varying religious backgrounds. "We have some campers who are unchurched and some who grew up going to church their whole lives," shares Ricky Howard, day camp director. "We have some campers who are Muslim and [others] whose parents are agnostic." Not everyone accepts Christ during their week at camp, but Barefoot is there to answer questions and share the love of Jesus through Bible curriculum and various speakers throughout the week. ►

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Photo courtesy of Barefoot Republic Camp and Retreat Center





Barefoot Republic realized the importance of celebrating differences while finding common ground and working toward mutual goals.



Photo courtesy of Barefoot Republic Camp and Retreat Center

### **Find Common Ground**

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Tommy Rhodes, Barefoot's executive director, says some kids come to camp in fancy cars with name-brand luggage and others come with their clothes in a trash bag, but they still find that they have similar experiences. "No matter what a kid's socio-economic status, they might have dealt with hard situations like divorce, addiction or having an absent father," he explains.

Two decades ago, when Barefoot Republic was first starting, they couldn't find many models of diversity in Christian camping, so they studied secular models. They looked at the military, corporate America and team sports and realized that all these groups had something bringing them together.

They realized the importance of celebrating differences while finding common ground and working toward mutual goals. They designed programs where campers would participate in a shared passion, learning about each other and themselves in the process.

They offer artistic, athletic and team-building programs through their overnight camps, day camps and family camps, as well as mobile camps in the Nashville area. "Those artistic and athletic platforms are core to what people are passionate about and what our campers are into," Carey says.

Rhodes pointed out that friendships develop quickly in the recording studio, the film studio and on a dance or sports team. He shares, "It's incredible how quickly the walls come tumbling down once they discover they have that passion in common."

### **Develop Partnerships**

To build diversity into their program, Barefoot Republic relies on the relationships they've built with other organizations that work with kids, including the Boys & Girls Club. They work with more than 100 partners, many of which are organizations serving people from ethnic and racial minority groups.

The partner organizations find kids who want to go to camp, help get camp applications filled out and even help the kids get to the bus to travel to camp.

One partner has provided campers every year. "[They've] built about \$15,000 a year into their budget to help with camp tuition," Rhodes says. "They supply 150 campers each summer. They are from the inner city — a combination of African American, Caucasian and other ethnicities and low-income families; which we need to be missional. We're intentional about that. We reserve half our spaces for those kids."

Barefoot Republic partners with Hispanic organizations in refugee neighborhoods and apartment complexes in Nashville and across the country. They rely on partner organizations to identify and recruit campers and, oftentimes, staff who can translate.

The staff at the partner organizations play an important role in building relationships with the campers. "It is so important to extend the opportunity and say, 'Do you have anybody on staff who has a relationship with these kids and would like to be present at camp this session?'" Rhodes explains.

"Then, if a discipline problem comes up, it's remarkable the difference when somebody already has a relationship and understands how that camper is hardwired — already knows how to navigate and communicate with that individual kid," Rhodes says. "That was critical for us to invite not just their kids, but their staff and key volunteers into the experience to help with situations like that." ►





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### Hire and Train for Diversity

Barefoot seeks to create diversity at its camp from the top down. "It's been a challenge for us at the board level, on our year-round team and certainly on our summer staff as well," Rhodes admits. "But, because there's so much diversity at the camper level, these leaders [are growing] up with us now. For summer staff, we're in the sweet spot. About 60% of our staff are alums of the camp."

Barefoot is intentional when training their diverse staff. "We talk about questions that are going to come up — things they are going to hear," Carey shares. "There are off-topic subjects that, when they come up, we coach staff to redirect campers to follow up with their youth leader or parents."

Carey goes on to explain that parents feel comfortable with this approach. "Because we have a diverse group with diverse backgrounds, we want to keep the main things as the main things."

Group activities are used to address many issues regarding diversity. "We are very intentional about recognizing and discussing specific topics as they relate to diversity and differences, but we're [also] clear on topics we do not address," Carey adds. "We want everyone to feel seen and heard in their own space."

Sometimes, campers' parents express concern or even fear surrounding diversity. "I tell parents that our camp provides incredible teachable moments that their kids would never have under their roof until they get to college or out of their home," says Rhodes.

### Spread the Word

Barefoot Republic doesn't spend a lot on marketing. "Our target audience is everyone, so the best marketing is just word of mouth," Rhodes explains. "We're constantly encouraging our families to spread the word."

They ask the same of their staff. "Our staff acts as fishers of men and women by putting things about camp on social media," shares Howard. "When they have a good experience, they talk about it at the grocery store and the library." This has been helpful attracting new families to camp, as well as new staff members.

Carey points out that their mission draws people to their camp and serves as their number one recruiting tool. "If you have a heart for reconciliation and bringing people together, it resonates with you," she says. "When we share the mission of what we are trying to do and the testimonies of transformation taking place, people desire that." ■



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