

UNIQUELY POSITIONED

A look at CCCA members serving the underserved



My wife, Betsy, and I attended a Michigan CCA sectional in the late '80s. We were young camp directors at a single-staff camp serving urban youth. The event was wonderful, amazing and overwhelming. Our resources were scarce, help was limited and difficult tasks were ubiquitous.

Photo courtesy of Beloved and Beyond



The keynote speaker was the director of a premier camp in the nation. My perception was that this organization was in a different league, and frankly, I had trouble listening to anything he had to say. He played the camp's recruiting video at the beginning of the session, and the camp's theme song was written and performed by Michael W. Smith (he was huge in the '80s; ask someone over 50). ►

This leader began his talk with an attention-getter, “Do you know the greatest camp in the country?” I was feeling sick and was tuning out as I anticipated his self-celebrating answer. He paused and then said, “Your camp is the greatest!” My attention was back. My heart was warmed and my spirit was refreshed as he presented the possibility that no other camp could reach the youth that God had prepared for our mission to reach. We were uniquely positioned. Our challenges did not disappear, but our resolve was strengthened by a few affirming words. God is faithful and has allowed us to welcome an untold number of our “neighbors” in the decades that followed.

Who Is Your Neighbor?

The greatest camp at serving the underserved is you! You are the one most suited to welcome the overlooked because they are your “neighbors.” Jesus was asked, “Who are my neighbors?” His response there, and throughout the Gospels, included the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, the sick, the foreigners and others who were not accepted in primary culture (i.e., Samaritans).

This is an exciting time in Christian camping. Outreach to our neighbors is growing exponentially. I recently had the privilege to visit camps and conference centers, talk to leaders and get some snapshots of those who are engaging the underserved effectively. I invite you to view these snapshots, unleash your imagination and be encouraged by other camps who are embracing their neighbors. Then, after hearing these stories and others, I encourage you to ask yourself, “What’s next?”

Serving Children of Prisoners

South Mountain Christian Camp (Bostic, North Carolina) grew out of the heart that founder O.A. Fish had for reaching underserved teens. In his book, *Fingerprints of God*, he states, “Each came from a totally different background, but they all had one thing in common. None of them had a normal father-son relationship. ... God gave me a special love for those boys.”

Executive Director Steve Collins carries on the ministry to the children of their county with the same policy: they never turn a child away because the family cannot afford to pay. To connect with the youth who would benefit from a camp experience, South Mountain is intentional about being visible at fairs, outdoor concerts and other community events. A major emphasis of the camp’s ministry is to children of an incarcerated parent and work closely with Angel Tree Camping to serve those children. They have also developed strong relationships with their local schools and partner with Psalm68five and other ministries that connect with youth from hard places.

Collins admits that it is a significant challenge to raise enough resources for the 70% of youth who need scholarship assistance to attend. Staff recruitment is another ongoing concern at South Mountain, although many of their staff are raised up through the camp’s leadership development program. So, are these extra ministry hurdles worth it?

Collins responds, “Absolutely. Without a doubt. In fact, I received a thank-you note this morning from a former camper who grew up in a single-parent, low-income home. At camp, she received Christ. She said, ‘Thank you for taking the time out of your summers to love on a stranger’s child. I was able to make the best decision in my life because of you.’”

Collins encourages other camps serving underserved teens, saying, “Don’t give up on these kids. They need this. They may not seem to respond right away but keep inviting them back. You never know when the next breakthrough moment is going to come, but when it comes, their lives will be changed forever.” ►



Photo courtesy of Beloved and Beyond



No other camp could reach the youth that God had prepared for our mission to reach.

This is an exciting time in Christian camping. Outreach to our neighbors is growing exponentially.

Serving Campers with Special Needs

Beloved and Beyond (Rosebud, Texas) exists to spread hope to “people who have differing abilities, through camps, socialization and on the job training.” Their mission provides a community to their neighbors with special needs — giving them a place “where all people can believe they are beloved and belong.”

Glen and Laura Elder helped establish a special-needs camp in 2006 but were let go due to COVID. Glen said it was one of the hardest seasons they have ever endured, but they were “blessed by a good Christian counselor and great friends who helped us moving forward.” At a crossroads of going back to a “normal” career or restarting in ministry, the Lord said, “Do it again!”

Beloved and Beyond was born with an expanded vision of a previous mission. Instead of renting various facilities and moving from place to place, God provided for them to purchase their own beautiful camp facility in Rosebud, Texas. While it was a challenge to launch a new ministry during COVID, Glen says it was worth it. “This ministry is incredibly impactful for campers, volunteers and summer staff and even camper parents. So much life change happens each summer.”



Photo courtesy of Wildwood Hills Ranch



Reaching Fatherless Campers and Single Moms

Higher Ground at Lake Louise (Boyne Falls, Michigan) is growing in its vision for their neighbors. Once a denominational camp with declining constituents, the camp renewed itself with a vision to reach fatherless campers and their mothers. While maintaining programming for their denomination, they purposefully partnered with organizations like Big Brothers, Kids Hope and Bethany Christian Services by providing a Christian summer camp opportunity for fatherless youth.

Psalm68five, founded by Bryan Johnson, became a partner ministry to provide resources, training and scholarships for these campers. The single mothers are given opportunities for learning experiences and encouragement while the youth are learning about the promises given to them as special children of the Heavenly Father.

Bruce Johnson, Higher Ground's board chair (former camper and Bryan's brother) networks to help get children to camp, provides follow-up for their families and increases support for their mothers. Serving their neighbors is not without the challenges of resourcing and staffing, but the families and youth are blessed by this place where they learn the love and special blessings of God.

Reaching At-risk Kids

Wildwood Hills Ranch (St. Charles, Iowa) utilizes traditional camping, leadership development and equestrian therapy "to transform lives and strengthen communities by providing healing, hope and God's unconditional love to children and youth at risk."

Wildwood Hills Ranch takes huge steps to transition their neighbors to lifelong family. Executive Director Matt Moeckl's approach is unique. He explains that a stable and safe family is critical to the children who attend, so the camp promises a place at camp for each child from age 8 through 18 at no cost. Moeckl says, "We want each child to know that they have a place and a home with us no matter what."

Moeckl continues, "We are a business-to-business model, and one of our core competencies is our partnerships," in which the camp is working to provide value to others. "We work with 56 community partners like schools, Department of Human Services, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boy's and Girl's Clubs and a host of others that refer youth to us."

Wildwood Hills Ranch faces challenges like every camp, but Moeckl can tell story after story about changed youth, families and trajectories that make every effort worth it. ►

How You Can Serve the Underserved

10 steps to serve your “neighbors”

Your camp or conference center is the greatest one to reach the neighbors Jesus talked about. You just need a map to guide you along the journey. Here’s a guide I think can help your camp or conference center focus on serving the underserved in your area.

1. **Look beyond.** Think past the urgency of daily leadership. Take a breath. Look for the neighbors around you who are overlooked. Then, be intentional.
2. **Start.** As God guides your heart to an underserved group, determine one action. Then, do it. (Then determine the next action and do it. Repeat.)
3. **Proceed as a learner.** Relationships are the focal point of ministry. Different cultures and perspectives can cause hurdles for well-intentioned efforts. Develop friendships, social IQ and sensitivities that help you to see beyond your cultural and socio-economic realities.
4. **Redefine success as faithfulness.** In *Tattoos on the Heart*, Gregory Boyle writes, “Jesus was always too busy being faithful to worry about success. I’m not opposed to success; I just think we should accept it only if it is a byproduct of our fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones.” Let faithfulness be your guide.
5. **Adapt culture.** Do life with those you are seeking to serve. Stand together. Share leadership. Welcome your neighbors into your camp family and recognize that space is needed for that growth. Share ownership.
6. **Be generous.** Give what you have. As others see your love in action, they will join in generosity. Generosity starts with you in response to God.
7. **Cast the vision.** Prepare for your neighbors. Growth includes social and relational elements, human resources and bricks and mortar (sometimes). Prepare your team and bring everyone with you.
8. **Share resources.** Sharing of resources is the DNA that first drew me to CCCA decades ago. It’s still happening! Work together. (CCCA’s Camp Forums, RoundTables and Resource Library can be helpful resources to learn from and share your wisdom.)
9. **Take steps.** Camps are taking big steps to serve the underserved. Join them. Learn from them. You don’t have to do this alone.
10. **Have fun!** Loving our neighbors is something we get to do! Celebrate together!



Photo courtesy of Carolina Creek

I am encouraged by the scores of camps and conference centers that are welcoming the underserved.

Planning to Extend Ministry

Tejas Camp and Retreat (Giddings, Texas) is a service-oriented host camp and conference center that is redefining growth. They are creating a strategy to develop their site to multiply their opportunities for growing *people*, in contrast to growing the *number* of people. This Texas-size initiative includes reserving a percentage of summer camp, retreat season and family program for their neighbors. These include a school in a challenged community of Houston's 5th ward and families in the foster care system. Tejas aims to partner with other ministries to provide camp opportunities for organizations that can't afford to offer camp for their constituents.

Executive Director Paul Biles says, "We want to have our own Corners of the Field." Big plans bring great responsibilities and opportunities, including raising the funds with partners who want to help carry out Tejas' vision. But the challenge is worth it to be able to bless their neighbors with the gift of camp.

Synergize to Serve More

I am encouraged by the scores of camps and conference centers that are welcoming the underserved. Even more, I am overjoyed by the growing tide of unity in this arena. An example of this synergy is demonstrated by those reaching the fatherless.

In the months ahead, CCCA will be inviting member camps and conference centers to engage in community discussions and learn about serving kids who come from hard places.

■ ■ ■

Now that you've viewed a few snapshots, it's time to let your imagination run. Be intentional about bringing to life the next frame and develop the snapshot that your camp or conference center is positioned to bring to life. You are the greatest camp to reach the underserved, and you don't have to go it alone! ■



Mark Davidhizar and his wife, Betsy, served as executive director for over three decades at Camp Beechpoint (Allegan, Michigan), a partner of Angel Tree camping and Psalm68five, where they ministered to underserved youth from the Chicago area. One of his passions is to encourage organizational leaders to see clearly, move forward effectively and develop resources needed to accomplish their mission. Mark's and Betsy's other passion is traveling to visit their four children and their growing grandchildren. Currently, Mark is senior consultant with Visionworks.