

The Lasting Positive Impact Of Summer Camp

By Andy Pritikin, Director/Owner of Liberty Lake Day Camp, as published in The Princeton Packet, Messenger Press, Register News and others (2004).

This summer over 10 million children will attend over 12,000 camps. At the same time, many more millions of children will be spending their summers "hanging out" around the house, the local pool, etc, oblivious to the amazing experience they could be having at camp. There are all kinds of camps available for all kinds of children, at all kinds of prices (be sure to look for the ACA American Camping Association accreditation logo when looking for a quality camp). But when I try to explain to non-camp parents the tremendous positive impact that camps make on children, I'm often met with blank stares or silence on the other end of the phone. While most camps will give you personal references from people you may or may not know, I would like to share a couple of success stories from some former campers that you might know of:



Academy Award Winner Denzel Washington, as quoted from his press bio: "A native of Mt. Vernon, NY, Washington had his career sights set on medicine when he attended Fordham University. But during a stint as a summer camp counselor he appeared in one of the theater productions; he was bitten by the acting bug and returned to Fordham that year seeking to become an actor.

What actually happened was that Denzel's campers and fellow counselors convinced him to

participate in a silly role in the camp musical. Being away from home, and amongst a new group of supportive peers gave Denzel the courage and temporary confidence to try an exciting new experience that changed the course of his life- and has enriched all of ours! Every summer, campers are taken out of their comfort zone (read: off the couch in front of the TV), enabling them to try activities like boating, fishing, archery, mountain boarding, acting in the camp musical, and numerous other options that you can't get at home!

Disney and ABC President and CEO, Michael Eisner has just released a book entitled [Camp](#), in which he explains how he learned much of his leadership and drive... at Summer Camp! The following testimonial is paraphrased from a speech he recently gave at the [ACA-Tri-State Camp Conference](#) in New York City.



"I loved camp- as a camper, and later as a counselor. Every moment, every year, every ball game, canoe trip, wilderness experience and just being a team player- and I've long been fascinated by why this is. After all, camp takes children and separates them from their families, from their televisions, telephones, VCR's, PlayStations and computers for weeks at a time to take them to what? To live ten to a cabin without air conditioning or their Mom's cooking/bed making/driving/one-day laundry service... unable to watch TV, sleep 'til noon or visit a mall? And, yes, they love it! When it's over, they don't want to leave, and, when they grow up, they want to go back. The fact is, today's children have amazing toys and gadgets at their command that allow them to experience everything but the REAL THING. I have nothing against most of these toys. (Disney) makes a lot of them. But, at the end of the day, reality is what kids prefer. Camp puts them in a world of their own creation. What could be more exciting? What could be more empowering? No video game can compare."



It's true. Camps build their own safe community each summer, and recreate it again, year after year. Every day at every camp, children are presented

with more variables than any computer programmer could ever put into a video game. Campers are empowered to make snap decisions that directly impact them- **without Mom or Dad's safety net.** This is one of the main reasons that kids love camp- because they get to feel like grown-ups. Camp empowers kids, and gives them a sense of respect that they equate to the "grown-up" world.

It's an interesting paradox that as adults we yearn for our youth, while our children starve for the freedom of adulthood. But is it mostly lip-service? At home, kids may SAY they want to be grown-ups, but they're more than willing to have someone else get them ready in the morning, make their beds, serve them meals, and get them from place to place *on time!* At camp however, these responsibilities rest in the hands of the campers, where all of a sudden, their choices actually have immediate implications! To quote Eisner, "**(Campers) get to be little grown-ups- and, in the process, they actually do some growing up.**"

Camp is a liberating experience. While today's children have wondrous toys, hundreds of TV channels, and video games that boggle the mind, these products have a much shorter play time than their manufacturers warranty. Camp is real- a real-life, truly "magic kingdom", untouched by time and commercialism, that can inspire children to believe that anything is possible and that their potential is limitless. And Camp Memories, if you ask anyone who has them, come with a **lifetime** warranty!

The inspirational actor Christopher Reeve told a group of camp professionals a few years ago how as a young teen he never thought he had the ability to swim to the bottom of the lake at his summer camp to retrieve the coin thrown in by a



counselor (a rite of passage at his camp for the older campers). After dozens of attempts over the course of a few years, he was finally able to hold his breath long enough to come up with the coin. This was a life altering experience that proved to him that he had the inner fortitude to achieve the seemingly impossible.

Alas, it is not just campers whose lives change at camp- In my 10 years as a camp director I've seen dozens of adults, both young and young at heart change the course of their lives based on an eight-week summer experience. Just last summer, a college senior decided to put off law school in order to get a teaching degree and try a career working with children. Working with children in a camp setting is not theoretical and boring "Management 101"- once again it's real-life, sink or swim, and it's a great barometer to see if you have what it takes! According to Eisner: **"The lessons I learned! On canoe trips, we could never survive the first day if we didn't practice teamwork, show initiative, handle adversity, listen well and, not least important, maintain a sense of humor."** As adults, we know that these attributes don't just apply to canoe trips. They represent keys to success in one's career and in life, and they won't be learned while spending summers playing X-Box or PlayStation!

Camp transports kids to a place where everyone has the same stuff: a T-shirt, pair of sneakers, bathing suit, and little else. Camp takes kids away from many of the superficial things they value, to teach them the things of real value- adaptability, responsibility, and how to become a successful human being. Take a cue from the Head of Disney: **"I can hardly think of an aspect of my life that wasn't positively affected by my camping experience... What a gift camp gives to kids."**