



Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp

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An Overview of Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp

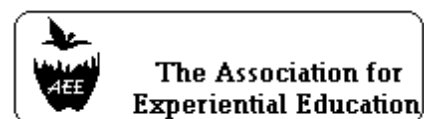
Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp has a long history of helping disadvantaged and at-risk youth. Since 1929 the camp, located on 88 acres near Ferndale, has provided a free summer residential camping program for 9 to 14 year olds. As societal problems affecting youth became more apparent, the camp added other programs to meet those needs. One such program is the comprehensive alternative Classroom Experience, which has operated since 1988 for at-risk 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders in the Little Rock and Pulaski County School Districts. Pfeifer Camp also offers parenting workshops, teacher training workshops, ropes course training, an annual Honor Camp program, and a Counselor-In-Training program for 14 to 17 year olds.

The Alternative Classroom Experience (ACE), which operates from September through May each year, is a 30 day residential, educational, and wilderness experience for 165 third, fourth, and fifth graders who are not achieving their potential in the regular classroom. This prevention program provides a highly structured classroom with certified teachers. Besides academics, campers learn problem solving skills, crisis management skills, and acceptance of personal responsibility through a variety of outdoor, environmental, and team-building activities. Other components of the program are mandatory weekly parenting workshops, a transition period where students are monitored upon return to their regular classroom, and long-term follow up through the completion of 7th grade. In addition, the staff collaborate with other local youth agencies to provide continued service during the teen years. As an incentive, all campers who continue to do well in school receive a free scholarship for summer camp. ACE graduate are expected to show academic, behavioral, and/or self-esteem improvements. We go beyond the “band aid” approach to solving the problems of today’s youth. In working with this young population, we emphasize prevention—giving children the chance, and showing them they have the choice, to succeed in the regular classroom setting.

The residential summer camping program serves approximately 300 campers each summer between the ages of 9 and 14. Campers engage in numerous activities such as hiking, swimming, canoeing, camping, cooking out, playing games, and participating in team-building initiatives. These activities are designed to improve self-esteem and social living awareness, develop problem-solving skills, and to learn how to have fun. Campers who prove themselves to be honorable and respectful are invited to participate in the special Honor Camp at the end of the season. Also, former campers between the ages of 14 and 17 are allowed to participate in the volunteer Counselor-In-Training (CIT) program in which they work alongside the staff. At age 18, CITs are eligible to become paid staff. The camp’s Youth Action Council of CITs meets on a bi-monthly basis, serving the community and providing input for the camp programs. Campers and CITs are expected to improve in terms of behavior and goal-setting.

The camp programs are geared toward children exhibiting the following characteristics: poor peer group and/or adult relationships, poor self-esteem, marginal grades or a sustained drop in grades over time, sporadic school attendance/tardiness, marginal problem solving skills (i.e. prone to arguing, fighting), moderate learning difficulties (excluding special education and emotionally disturbed students), stressful environmental background (including but not limited to single parent homes, foster care, abuse, and abandonment), and family history of violence, drug use, teen pregnancy, and/or crime. So often this population of youth slips through the “cracks” of service agencies. Many times the shy, quiet third grader sitting in the corner of the classroom is the neediest of all, but our system today

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focuses on those who are loud and troublesome. Most often our society gets bogged down with helping children and youth after the fact rather than before.

The Pfeifer Camp “recipe” helps students achieve the program goals in several ways. Students must live together in a cooperative environment for 5 weeks, which provides ample time to learn necessary problem-solving skills. Students practice these skills through non-threatening team-building and critical-thinking activities and are then able to incorporate these skills into school and home situations. At Pfeifer Camp students are allowed to fail with dignity and to repeat the experience with success. Students quickly learn that they have choices in life and that they don’t have to act or live as they have in the past. Through Reality Therapy, the camp discipline model, students must accept responsibility for their own actions. Many students make life-long decisions at camp to change their behavior and attitude. For some students the change of environment can be overwhelming as well as relieving. As one camper wrote, “Pfeifer Camp is a great place to be. You don’t have to worry about getting shot, being robbed, or hearing traffic all night. You can leave all your worries at the gate.” Many children today have never experience a violence-free environment. As with most good things, once they have a taste, they’re willing to work hard for more.

As one of the top 200 oldest camps in the nation, Pfeifer Camp offers a rustic setting with modern facilities. Most of the buildings, including the cabins, were built in the 1930’s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, which is a precursor to the AmeriCorps program. Those buildings are made out of wood and natural rock with wood-burning fireplaces. The camp is nestled in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains with the Little Maumelle River bordering one side. In addition, the facility includes a ropes course, a large ballfield, a full-size basketball court, a junior Olympic size swimming pool, and a garden.

Pfeifer Camp is unique in that all of its programs are free to participants due in large part to the long-standing funding collaborative of the Downtown Kiwanis Club of Little Rock and the local school districts. Pfeifer Camp is one of the few Arkansas camps certified by the American Camping Association and the only one licensed as a residential child-care facility through the Arkansas Department of Human Services. The camp reputation is impeccable, boasting such alumni as General Wesley Clark, former Presidential Candidate and Commander-in-Chief of NATO forces; and Keith Jackson, former NFL star and Super Bowl champion of the Green Bay packers and founder of PARK (Positive Atmosphere Reaches Kids), a program for older at-risk youth.

The quality of the camp and its programs has been recognized on local and national levels. In 2005 ACE was one of six programs nationwide named an Exemplary Substance Abuse Prevention Program through NASADAD. The International Association for Experiential Education (AEE) named Pfeifer Camp as Organization of the Year in 1998. The Mid-South Regional branch of AEE named the camp Organization of the Year in 2003. In recent years Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp became an AmeriCorps National Service site, offering full and part-time volunteer positions. In 2002 AmeriCorps named Pfeifer Camp the State AmeriCorps Organization of the Year. A documentary on Pfeifer Camp was nominated for an Emmy award and received several other national media awards. The camp has also been evaluated through two significant research projects. The first evaluation through the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Social Work found significant results when comparing the Pfeifer Camp students to control groups, which did not receive camp services. The second evaluation was the dissertation of Dr. Chris Caram, who conducted extensive interviews of campers, parents, staff, and school personnel to determine the reasons for the success of the camp programs.

Our best recognition comes from the campers themselves. Here is an excerpt from a letter written by a graduating ACE 4th grader to an incoming 3rd grader: “Dear 3rd grader, I know Pfeifer Camp is a totally new thing to you. Don’t be worried though OK? Your counselor and AmeriCorps member will treat you with love, care, respect, and trustworthiness, etc....Pfeifer Camp is a great place and you better believe it. I was scared at first too but it will be all ok. Ok? Well, I hope you have a fun time at Pfeifer Camp.”