

Pfeifer Camp AmeriCorps Success Stories

Our AmeriCorps grant requires that we include success stories in our quarterly reports on program activities. Yesterday, we asked our AmeriCorps members to write a success story related to their personal experience at camp. The AmeriCorps members had no idea we would be sharing them today. We didn't know either, until we read them and were compelled to share them. Hopefully, they convey the success of ACE on the lives of the students who participate and on the lives of the AmeriCorps members themselves.

1. **This is not a simple story about a nine year old's struggle with multiplication. Rather it's a story about speaking a common language.** My favorite story-teller and folk singer, Dana Lyons, shared with me the secret to connecting with children. He told me to speak their language. Although I don't understand or have a grasp on every word in the vocabulary of our youth today, I've paid enough attention to be able to communicate.

In my adolescence, math class was comparable to a foreign language. Therefore, when nine year old Mary expressed her difficulties with multiplication, I understood her frustrations. When I suggested that we write a rap, her desire to learn multiplication was born. **Midway through our lyrical brainstorm she said, "You get me."**

Recognizing the distinct type of intelligence within a child is the best way to assist their learning. When the logical-mathematical intellect is not strong within a child, success for learning times tables can still be found. Using the child's stronger abilities—whether it is bodily-kinesthetic skills, linguistic aptitude, musical talents and so on—will allow them the opportunity to feel intelligent because they are using the attribute suit they feel best in. When a child or person of any age is approached with a language they don't understand, the opportunity for learning is likely to happen. When we use the teaching style our children identify with, then we can communicate effectively. **The Alternative Classroom Experience program at Pfeifer Camp permits the intelligences that are hiding to come alive.**

2. Before deciding to adventure into a year of serving through AmeriCorps, I was working in the business world. **I never thought that I would trade my cubicle for a cabin filled with at-risk children.** When I first arrived at Pfeifer Camp, I wasn't sure what I was getting into. I was filled with deep anxiety that I wouldn't be able to handle the job that would be given to me and that I wouldn't make much of a difference. **I was worried that the children I would be working with would be out of control and that I wouldn't be able to make a connection.** Then I met Charles

He was easy to notice in the group, because he desired so much to stand out. **The first memory I have of Charles was him shouting and beating on a table as loud as he could.** A lot of energy and time went into trying to help Charles change his behavior but his counselors never lost hope. I continuously challenged and questioned Charles' negative behavior and showed him how he could change. I tried to share with him some struggles that I had when I was his age and how I over came those struggles.

After five weeks of camp, Charles was not the same child he was when he first arrived. He became respectful to his peers and adults. He no longer desired negative attention but sought positive consequences. He changed from being a follower to being a positive leader. **Charles didn't just change his ways and influence others but he also confirmed that I chose correctly to serve a year in AmeriCorps.**

3. During the second session of this year at Pfeifer Camp, I had the privilege of getting to know a special young lady by the name of Angela. By being selected as a student for this residential facility, Angela had the opportunity to attend classes and experience all that the out-of-

doors in Arkansas has to offer all in a five week program. Angela is a very intelligent ten year old who, despite the fact that she had gone camping with her family, is quite terrified of the woods and hates to be away from her family. On her first night after about two hours at camp, she decided that camp was not the place for her and she needed to go home right away. **As her counselor, I had the responsibility of talking her out of attempting to hike the twenty-four miles back to her house and convincing her to give Pfeifer Camp a chance.** Due to the fact that it was quite dark outside and we were in the middle of the woods, I persuaded Angela to postpone her departure for at least a day and to try to get to know some of her cabin mates.

For the rest of the week, Angela began to acclimate to camp with the help of some of the returning campers who decided to make it their mission to befriend her and convince her to stay. All was going well until we went camping on Wednesday. **Angela did not enjoy the woods. While her peers were sitting by the camp fire, roasting marshmallows, Angela was inside her tent crying.** No matter how much coaxing she received from her peers or her counselors, she would not come out. The next campout, the children responsible for setting up the tents formulated a plan for getting Angela to come out of her shell. They set up the tent close enough to the campfire so that Angela could be in the circle of campers while remaining in the tent. Their plan worked. **Angela kept the door of the tent open and was able to chat with everyone while still in the tent. At one point she forgot her fears and left her tent when enticed by a s'more.**

During the last three weeks of camp, Angela became increasingly more comfortable in the out of doors. She participated in all of the games and even told me how much she enjoyed hiking with the rest of her friends. At the end of the five weeks, she questioned me intensely about what she needed to do to come back for summer camp and "Can I come to summer camp more than once or do they just let you come for one week?" **I know Angela's confidence in the out-of-doors is probably not that important to her teachers at her regular school, but seeing Angela conquer her fears was a major achievement by anyone's standards.** I am so incredibly proud of her success and hope to see her back here for summer camp.

4. **Just a day before the highly anticipated start of the program, "Gene" lost his father.** He arrived at camp with a backpack, a sleeping bag, and a hesitant smile. Unsure of these new feelings, Gene tried bravely to move on. During the day, he was moody and easily became angry with his peers. At night, he often cried himself to sleep.

He attended a funeral that weekend before returning to camp. The impact of the loss was now distinct. **He was overwhelmed with grief.**

He wrote a message to his counselor saying "It's too hard, I can't do this anymore". He told his peers that he probably would not return to camp.

But Gene did come back the next week, and kept coming back each week. He was resilient and determined to be strong for his family.

He was intent on graduating from the program. **He began to talk about his loss with his counselors and peer group.** Activities during the day helped him understand his feelings. In the evenings, Gene listened to a story about a boy also coping with a loss. He kept a journal to track his feelings. He was becoming more confident everyday.

Several weeks later, Gene was at his graduation ceremony. **He was selected to give a speech about his experience at the program.**

Recently, I had the opportunity to see Gene back at his school. He was upbeat and positive and anxious to show me his grades. His determination to overcome had become a determination to succeed.

5 **In my life I have had many accomplishments.** To name a few I have served honorably in the Air Force as an F-16 crew chief, graduated college with a bachelors degree in social work, and

helped save a dying man that went into cardiac arrest after a tornado hit my town. **These are all important accomplishments but are not considered something that has made me successful. The element that has is called self-discovery.** I am a camp counselor here at Pfeifer Camp where I learned about self-exploration and the importance it holds for yourself and the relationships you have with others.

Before I arrived at Pfeifer Camp I was an extremely selfish person which was demonstrated through my actions toward other individuals. **It wasn't until a special person here at camp sat me down and had an in-depth conversation about who I really am and if I had done an internal evaluation of myself.** That is where it all began. **On a daily basis I always try to do a personal inventory of what is important to me and why. This keeps me grounded and successful in my relationships with my family and friends.** A quote by an anonymous person that I have always remembered is "If you died today, what would people say about you tomorrow".

6. A Change of Heart - It's mid November and the start of another session at Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp. **A young boy arrives at camp full of anger and hate.** He's the boy that isolates himself from the group and believes he doesn't have to follow rules and directions. He finds it fun to keep the rest of the group back. **The boy didn't want to be at camp and he didn't want to do homework either.** He would refuse to do anything. By the end of the week it looked like there was no hope, but could this boy have a change of heart?

Carl left week one and week two on a bad note with still the signs of not wanting help, but just when it seemed like there was no hope, Carl surprised everyone and arrived back to camp on week three with a change of heart. Carl told a counselor that "if he wanted to have fun then he needed to be involved."

Involved, Carl was. In fact, **Carl went from being one of the most troublesome kids and the kid that no one wanted to be around to being the leader of the group and the kid that everyone respected and loved being around.** Carl developed great leadership skills and just wanted everyone in the group to get along. Carl just didn't think about himself—he thought about the others as well.

While Carl made it his duty to help out the cabin, he also took time to help himself. Carl knew that his weakness at camp was homework, and on the last week of camp Carl made it a goal to not be the last one done with homework. Carl spent all his free time on his homework and by the end of the week he had accomplished that goal.

Carl was now smiling and was enjoying himself at camp where in the past he wanted nothing to do with camp. Carl came to the realization that if you want to be there and have fun, then there will be a positive consequence.

During weeks one and two Carl didn't want to camp out and refused to be part of the experience. **He had to be isolated from the group and in the mornings would make a big fit and didn't help take down the tents. But by weeks four and five, Carl was in charge of the camp outs and was enjoying himself.**

When the last day of camp arrived Carl was full of excitement and was so happy. Carl loved camp and didn't want to leave he just sat out on the porch until his brother came and told him it was time to go.

Carl made an improvement that no one thought was possible but after just five weeks he was a completely different kid. **In fact his mother said Carl has changed at home too, and he's even telling his mom that she needs to get her chores done. At the graduation his mom was smiling and happy to see that her boy had a change of heart.**

It's the end of December and the end of another session at Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis camp. A young boy leaves camp full of happiness and love. He's the boy that is always involved and always

the one that listen and follows directions. He's the boy that worked hard and completed his homework. He's the boy that had a change of heart!!!

7. Rose's time at Pfeifer Camp was a time of great personal growth. **When she first came to camp she was extremely shy and withdrawn, seemingly unsure of herself and where she fit in.** Rose often had an aversion to calling attention to herself whether it was positive or negative and had trouble expressing her needs and wants in daily situations due to this. It was difficult for her to step outside of her self-imposed boundaries, to include herself within the activities of her peers, and adapt to camp life as a whole. During her session at camp, she worked diligently on being able to overcome these boundaries, become more self-sufficient, assertive, and improve her self confidence.

Over the course of the five weeks that she was at camp, Rose worked on stepping outside of her boundaries by writing weekly goals for herself to accomplish. While at first, she had trouble thinking of these goals on her own, she soon became proficient in setting goals for herself as well as finding ways in which to accomplish them. **In the beginning, she had to be pushed by her counselors to take on leadership roles, but as the session progressed, she began to make a special effort to push herself to step outside of her boundaries and take on those leadership roles on her own.** She quickly became more and more self confident as she took on more responsibilities.

As the session progressed, Rose was noticed volunteering for responsibilities without having to be asked to do so more often. She also began to open herself up to her peers more, and thus made many new friendships which improved her self esteem and gave her the self-confidence to become a more effective leader. Due to her newfound self confidence, Rose was able to take on being given the responsibility of being in the counselor role for a short period of time, and because of her leadership skills, she was very effective and her peers took her direction well because of their respect for her. Rose's family often expressed that they were seeing positive changes in her when she came home on weekends, such as growth in her self confidence as well as her self esteem, and more personal responsibility. **Due to her experiences at Pfeifer Camp, Rose now knows that she can go into new situations confidently, assertively, and master new tasks without self-doubt or fear.**

8. When asked to write a "success" story from the Pfeifer Camp files, I found myself sifting through a multitude of memories for one great story; only to find that **it is the seemingly small victories of everyday camp life that make up the overall success story of Pfeifer Camp and it's kids.**

Success is the 5th grader reading on a first grade level who, in an endeavor to improve their reading skill, comes to find a great passion for books. Success lies within the child who comes to camp so withdrawn that you don't recognize their voice, but somewhere between week 1 and 5, becomes one of the most respected campers and leaders in the cabin. It is the child who never academically "succeeds" in the classroom yet voluntarily takes on the role of peer tutor to other struggling students at camp. Success is even claimed by the child who struggles through all five weeks of camp, but takes with them a sense of accomplishment that acts as a motivator to a successful transition back into their regular classroom.

What I have come to find is that when reasonable yet high expectations are set with the support each child needs, being successful becomes the rule and not the exception. Pfeifer Camp is a place where every child is a success story.