

Where They Are Now – Confirming the Important Work Camps Do

Lance W. Ozier, EdD | November 1, 2015



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Several years ago, the editor-in-chief of this magazine asked me to write a piece describing the outcomes of underserved kids who had the advantage of attending summer camp. This article examines select alumni of three ACA-accredited camps serving traditionally under-represented camp populations to describe the accomplishments of these former campers and attempt to understand how their camp experiences influenced their outstanding outcomes.

The Camps

Not unlike traditional summer camps in many ways, these three programs are, however, different — and why they are different is important. The campers and the camps make long-term commitments to one another — the kids go to camp for many summers and there is counseling and follow-up all year round. These camps are, in fact,

comprehensive youth development programs with a long-range goal in mind to envelop young people in the community services and educational opportunities that might not be otherwise available. These are very special programs that are just now seeing the future of the campers they started with decades ago.

Sherwood Forest Camp

In its 79th year of serving Saint Louis-area children, Sherwood Forest Camp believes that education and opportunity are rights fundamental to all children. Sherwood Forest's mission is to transform the lives of children in need through powerful programs that allow them to discover their self-worth, realize their potential, and become productive citizens. In the words of Sherwood Forest Executive Director Mary Rogers, "We help kids discover the best in themselves so they can grow up to do good in the world."

Project Morry

Project Morry is named for the late Morry Stein, whose dream was to give no less than every American child, regardless of economic status, the invaluable gift of summer camp. Morry was the chairperson of the American Camping Foundation, Inc., an organization that raised over \$1 million to send underprivileged children to summer camp. In October 1994, he traveled to Martinsville, Indiana, to head the foundation's annual board meeting. Morry's life was taken in an airplane accident on his return flight home before he could fulfill his mission. In 1995, inspired by his dream and to ensure that his vision of summer camp for all children became a reality, Morry's friends, colleagues, campers, and family created Morry's Camp. In fall 2007, the name Project Morry was adopted to communicate the full scope of the year-round youth development organization and reflect its comprehensive educational programming.

Fiver Children's Foundation

Like Sherwood Forest and Project Morry, the Fiver Children's Foundation is a comprehensive youth development organization empowering hundreds of children to develop life skills and to reach their full potential. Fiver participants come from some of the most marginalized neighborhoods in New York City and upstate New York. They have substantial academic, financial, and social service needs. Without Fiver, they would be at risk of not completing high school, becoming involved with gangs, engaging in drug use, or becoming parents before they are ready. At its core, as with Sherwood Forest's and Project Morry's longitudinal scope, Fiver's ten-year commitment supports all participants in becoming happy and productive citizens, enacting change in their communities and eventually beyond.

Intentional Influences

For these purposes it is necessary not to think of camps simply as fun factories, as popular culture far too often suggests. ACA's deeply researched, groundbreaking catalogue of youth development and 21st-century learning skills makes clear that American summer camps are the products of intentional and intellectual influences that should be embraced, perhaps more so than we do. Scott Brody (2013) said it best by suggesting "it's time to retire the 'magic' of camp," recommending "we need to claim the word enrichment and take our place as educators," and adding the skills children need to succeed should be taught at camp "with rigor and intentionality — and (we should) measure our results."

Indeed, it is possible to think of camp as what happens when you cross three distinct factors that all flourishing communities possess: supportive relationships, shared and personal responsibility, as well as a love for learning and continuous improvement. The alumni of these camps often reflect on how, during the several years of their camp experience, they took on aspects of these three values (and more) and learned to successfully and simultaneously make friends, increase their independence, and acquire new skills. When these forms of empowerment are combined, and amplified to the extent that campers carry them home from camp into their own lives and communities, the resulting evidence is enough to make us all proud. These are their stories; this is where they are now.

The Campers

Rose Holmes, a 1986 Sherwood Forest Leadership graduate, often thinks about a childhood place she still cherishes — a place where wooden bunk beds embrace campers as they fall asleep to the night sounds of a whippoorwill. Recalling long days of hiking to the mud cave or conquering a ropes course designed to build a cabin group's cohesiveness, Rose Scott, as she is known on air at WABE, the NPR affiliate in Atlanta, remarked, "Quite often I long for those days." In a career where she has to ask politicians about the lack of resources for the poor and the response is typically that it is the other political party's fight, Rose resists the urge to say, "Don't you know the three principles of Sherwood Forest Camp — friendship, cooperation, and learning — would really come in handy during the legislative session?"

Rose wants to tell them that kids from low-income communities need help to experience places like Sherwood Forest Camp, suggesting, “People who can enrich the lives of our nation’s youth need to know that a 12-year-old, little, African American girl can grow up to be an award-winning journalist who’s traveled to faraway places.”

Outside her family, the second most important place that has had a significant influence in her life, according to Rose, is Sherwood Forest. “What I recall most are experiences beyond remembering the trail to Lee Mountain or how to properly pack a backpack (by the way, I still do). It’s the caring nature of the staff coupled with the daily camp activities I still hold close to my heart. I’m proud of the impact it had on my life.”

Similar to Rose, Vincent Young, hailing from the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, reflected on the impact camp has had on his life: “Fiver has given me a strong sense of moral courage. The program has taught me to not be a bystander but an active participant in life.” Vincent is a U.S. Marine sergeant stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Having completed one tour in Afghanistan, one Marine Expeditionary Unit deployment, and becoming a rifle expert, he loves being a Marine because “it has exposed me to backgrounds and cultures I had never experienced.” Connecting his experiences as a Marine to his time at Fiver, he says they both helped him learn to work with all different types of people, which increased his team-building and leadership skills. “I feel the need to consistently do the right thing,” he says. “If I see something I don’t agree with, I correct it.”

Another Fiver alumna, Jasmine Mari Fernandez, from East New York, Brooklyn, shares Vincent’s passion for making a difference. She is now the outreach manager of partnerships for the Pre-K for All Outreach Team with the New York City Department of Education. While a student at Fairfield University, where she majored in political science and international studies and minored in peace and justice studies, she founded and directed a student-run organization that addressed issues of race, body image, sexuality, and faith through performing arts.

Jasmine also studied abroad in both Tanzania and Nicaragua, and found time to embark on a year of service as a legal caseworker for the St. Francis Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance with Jesuit Volunteer Corp (JVC) in Houston, Texas. Attributing her success to her camp experiences, Jasmine says, “Because of Fiver, I was surrounded with love and respect. The support and resources I was given helped shape me into a woman of confidence, integrity, and ambition. I can wholeheartedly say that I credit Fiver for my success thus far. I would not be where I am today without this program.”

Brandie Lee Johnson was a Morry’s camper from 1996 to 2004 and shares Jasmine’s passion for traveling and helping others. After earning a degree in performing arts from Oneonta University, and a master’s degree in theater education from New York University (NYU), she took part in a study abroad and volunteer program, traveling all over South Africa and working at an orphanage teaching drama and creative arts. Brandie moved to South Korea after NYU, where she taught drama and English to Korean students.

Brandie credits her success and happiness to the nurturing environment and education she received through Project Morry. “Morry’s Camp gave me the tools and encouragement that I needed to get a head start in life,” she said. Camp activities like reading, writing in journals, math with cooking, among other opportunities to build skills, have been tremendous influences on her and continue to resonate. “Morry’s Camp,” for example, “was the first place that gave me an opportunity at the age of 16 to lead the Drama Club.” After this experience Brandie knew she had the ability to teach children and adults drama and creative arts. “Do what makes your heart jump for joy,” she says, “and do it with a smile!”

Another Sherwood Forest Leadership graduate, Shannon Hambrick, started going to camp when he was 11 years old. Like Brandie, he credits his summer experiences as having a lasting impact on his life. He said, “What I learned at camp has taken me to Colorado, introduced me to my wife, introduced my brother to his wife, and allowed me to see my actions and the actions of others in a larger context.” Through his experiences at Sherwood Forest, Shannon made friends from around the world and learned about cultures that he might otherwise never have had the opportunity to experience.

“Sherwood Forest taught me to accept and to learn from others’ differences as opposed to seeing them as a barrier,” he recalls. He credits this lesson and many more to leading him to the career he enjoyed: working with troubled teens for the Missouri Division of Youth Services. “The myriad of different ideas on religion, diet, music, and dance have allowed me to dream bigger than I might have before,” he said. “The skills and love for the outdoors that I gained at Sherwood have guided my life through my choices of employment, companionship, and recreation.” Perhaps the biggest lesson Shannon learned at Sherwood was a sense of responsibility for his community and a willingness to help. For this and “a million other wonders,” he is truly thankful.

Like Shannon, Camilo Duque, a native of Corona in Queens, New York, credits camp with helping him expand his horizons as evidenced by his recent graduation from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), a school he had never heard of before the college trip he took while at Fiver. At RPI, Camilo studied to be a chemical engineer, and as a work-study student, he complemented his Materials Energy and Entropy Balances class by working under his mentor professor in a lab. This enabled him to learn about lab procedures and gain hands-on experience, eventually being selected as a teaching assistant for cellular and molecular biology.

At Fiver, Camilo recalls being recognized for having great academic potential, and he credits camp for giving him the direction needed for this potential to be fully realized. “Fiver embraced me and put me on the path to success,” he said. “Fiver developed my leadership and public speaking skills while also instilling in me a strong character and commitment to ethical behavior. Because of Fiver,” Camilo acknowledges, “I have the tools I need to build a solid foundation for a lifetime of success.”

Speaking of foundations, “Sherwood Forest will always have a special place in my heart,” affirms Marcus Millender, 2009 Sherwood Forest Leadership graduate, “since it is part of the foundation that makes me the leader I am today.” Currently, Marcus is in the U.S. Marine Corps working in electronics maintenance and just recently returned from a two-year duty stationed in Okinawa, Japan. Now in Cherry Point, North Carolina, Marcus was recently named Non-commissioned Officer of the Quarter in recognition of his leadership, and credits Sherwood Forest “for being a part of who I am today.” While in North Carolina, Marcus is working on a bachelor’s degree in electronics systems technology and is considering whether to leave the Marine Corps to pursue a career in electronics, or stay and become an officer. “Either route I take,” he says, “I will surely do my best at it!”

Rachel Andreus was a Project Morry camper from 1996 to 2004, making her a part of the “Pioneers” group. In 2008, she graduated from Cornell University, majoring in applied economics and management, with a concentration in marketing. Since then she’s worked at several advertising agencies and was recently promoted to digital director at the media-planning agency MEC in New York City. “A lot of people lose focus and think that college is not important and not a choice for them,” she said. Because of Morry’s Camp, “I never allowed myself to think that way. With so many counselors from so many colleges, I realized there is a school and a study for everyone, and there is financial aid available.” And Rachel has advice for current campers: “A college degree is invaluable, regardless of what school you attend. And try early on to get internships — experience matters most.”

“Ever since I was a kid, I was fascinated by the media,” said Saul Arvelo, a fellow Morry’s Camp Pioneer, and like Rachel, career-oriented from an early age. “I always had dreams of being an actor. As I got older, my passion for acting shifted towards producing and writing creative material for both television and radio.” Those dreams have turned into reality as Saul’s career has spanned working for NBCUniversal in a production management capacity and helping launch and hire staff for a new comedy clip show, Crazy Talk. Saul now works as a digital manager for the Fusion Network, an ABC-Univision joint venture, managing an office of writers, story editors, and digital producers for the www.Fusion.net website.

Reflecting on his connection to camp, Saul recalls that as chapter president of his college fraternity, “I spearheaded an alumni banquet where we raised over \$2,000 for Project Morry, the organization that I’ve been a part of since I was nine years old. It was a huge honor for me to give back to an organization that helped me get to where I am today.” Career-wise, Saul’s goal is to be a television producer for one of the major networks. “I need to put my creativity, attention to detail, and writing skills to work,” he says, “but at the same time, I plan on being involved with nonprofit organizations that provide young people from low-income neighborhoods all kinds of opportunities, like Morry’s Camp did for me.” Not only has Saul served as a Morry’s Camp summer and year-round staff member, this year he became the first alumni member of the Project Morry board of directors.

The Conclusions

Their stories, like our own life experiences, are not beyond belief — we know they are true — but they are, to some, beyond imagination. It can be very hard, maybe impossible, to imagine being transformed by an experience, perhaps more so for those who have never attended or worked at a camp. And such skeptics raise the question “Why, exactly, do we need camp experiences?” It goes way beyond reveling in the recreational or giving kids a world of good for one or more summers. Our best evidence for the indispensability of camp is the life success of so many of the youth who have attended.

A recent analysis by an outside evaluator (Baker-Smith, 2015) examined outcomes for Fiver alumni through summer 2014 of alums completing the ten-year Fiver program, including 272 alumni who started Fiver between the year 2000 and 2012. The report collected information on high school graduation for the entire sample group and college

enrollment for the majority of it. Of Fiver alums, 98 percent have graduated from high school, and 90 percent have enrolled in college for at least one semester. More striking, considering low overall national college and university retention rates, is that 83 percent of these Fiver alums continue to be enrolled in higher education. Of these students, 60 percent are focused on attaining a four-year degree and 10 percent a graduate degree. While some Fivers attend two-year colleges (and attain degrees there) to start, 95 percent of Fivers responding to the survey reported currently attending a four-year college.

By contrast, the national high school graduation rate hovered around 70 percent in 2008, and in some states and cities, it was much lower. New York City, like many other urban districts, sadly has a high school completion rate well below 50 percent (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). These sobering statistics make this generation of American students the first of any industrialized country to be less likely to graduate from high school than their parents. Camp has the capacity to change this statistic. Like Fiver, Project Morry boasts a high school graduation rate of nearly 100 percent, along with similar college-going and retention rates as reported in the Fiver data.

Educational economist Henry Levin (2009) has spent a lifetime calculating the cost-benefit of education. In his recent metrics, he found that each new graduate would, on average, generate economic benefits to the public sector of \$209,100. So imagine if the current number of dropouts were reduced by half through successful implementation of educational intervention, such as camp, the net present value economic benefit would be some \$45 billion.

Young people drop out of school because classrooms are places where learning is done to kids — meaning they're told what to think and how to answer. On the other hand, camp is a place where kids grow to learn for themselves; camps open their minds to possibilities they may not have seen before. Camp is where imagination flourishes — where kids can explore concepts and turn ideas on their head, opening them to changing how they see the world and how the world interacts with them.

A few years back I conducted a study with kids who had gone to summer camp for at least six or seven years. I asked them to talk about their camp experiences, and from their stories identified convincing evidence that summer camp is an important place for kids to learn and grow. Recently, the skills campers in my study attributed to their camp experiences — confidence, leadership, social skills, independence, self-direction — all tenets reflected in the previous profiles, have also been described in books and articles as important noncognitive factors essential for success in life.

For instance, a recent review of literature on the role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance issued by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2012) identified behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that are critical for success in school and in later life. These factors included attendance, work habits, time management, help-seeking behaviors, self-control, persistence, and social problem-solving skills that allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands. To anyone who knows the power of the summer camp experience, this list sounds like a familiar list of characteristics campers carry home with them at summer's end.

Scientists whose work Paul Tough followed for *How Children Succeed* have identified a very similar set of skills that they believe are crucial to success, including qualities like persistence, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism, and self-control. As Tough states, “Economists call these noncognitive skills. Psychologists call them personality traits. Neuroscientists sometimes use the term executive functions. The rest of us often sum them up with the word character” (2013).

For over 150 years, summer camps have been considered landscapes for learning (Ozier, 2010), and in particular, important venues for developing skills for character growth, such as cooperation, loyalty, persistence, honesty, courageousness, and confidence (Dimock & Hendry, 1929).

More recently, ACA conducted important studies (2007) with conclusions aligning closely with this list of noncognitive factors — 3,395 families whose child attended one of 80 different day or resident summer camps measured growth from precamp to postcamp surveys in four domains: positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, and positive values.

In *The Gift of Failure*, Jessica Lahey (2015) reviews research that recommends pushing children not toward conventional school and other successes, but toward the kind of independence that leads them to find their own way, and Lahey's 2015 ACA national conference keynote address recognized summer camp as an ideal place for young people to experience this type of growth.

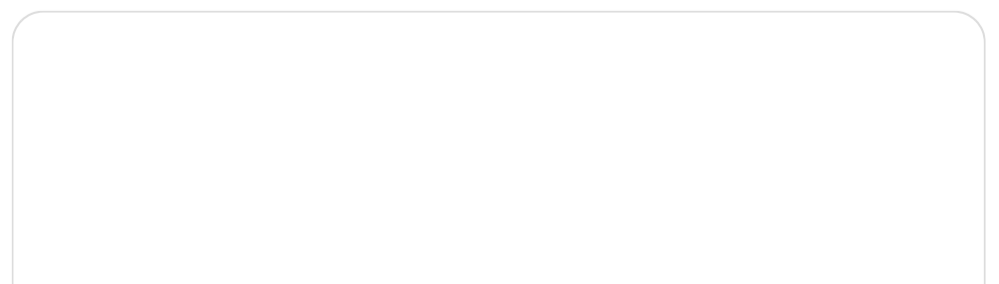
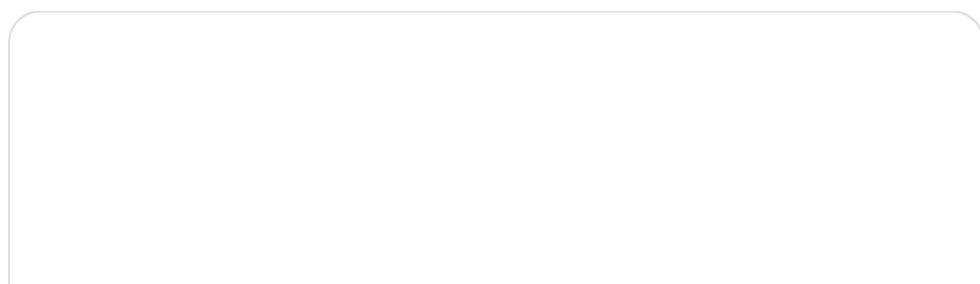
It comes as no surprise then that these research-based characteristics are some of the hallmarks of the successful camp alumni in the preceding profiles, outcomes of the opportunities that come about as a result of their experiences in intentional camp communities. These stories of where they are now demonstrate that camps are locations for young people to learn the practices and skills that will lead them into bright futures, and if we expect the next generation of young people to create a world in which they identify deficiencies and seek to repair them, then summer camps must be recognized as key locales for developing the relationships, responsibility, and curiosity necessary for children to, as educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2012) said, “imagine how things should be and how they might be.”

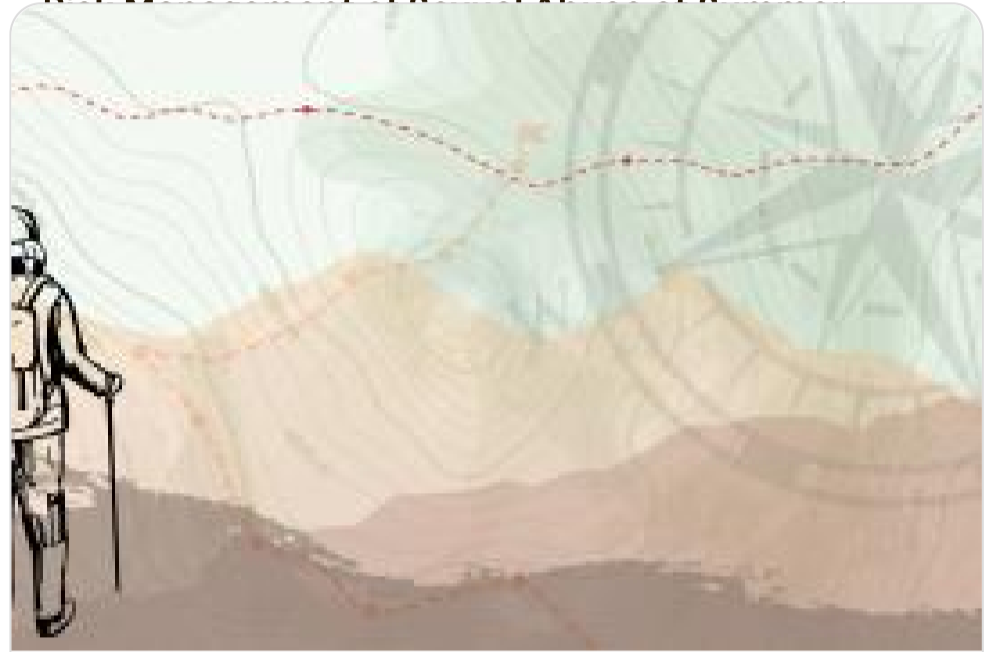
Photos on pages 28–29 courtesy of Sherwood Forest Camp, Lesterville, Missouri; Project Morry, Glen Spey, New York; and Fiver Children’s Foundation, Earlville, New York.

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- Lance Ozier spent 15 summers in the Catskill Mountains of New York as education coordinator at Morry’s Camp. Since 2010 he has volunteered on the ACA’s national Committee for the Advancement of Research and Evaluation (CARE). In 2015 Lance was recognized by ACA with a Hedley S. Dimock Award.*

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