

## The Life Lessons of Overnight Summer Camp

As the temperatures gradually rise and spring eventually gives way to summer, the lessons of the classroom are left behind and young people soon will have the opportunity to learn in a different type of classroom: the beautiful outdoors.

And one of the best ways to help a child learn, grow and thrive is to give them the experience of overnight camp.

Every year, I have the honor and privilege of watching hundreds of kids explore, create, discover and build confidence at YMCA's Camp Piomingo. All kids have amazing potential. At the Y, we believe the values and skills learned early are vital building blocks for life, and that young people deserve an opportunity to discover who they are and what they can achieve. At Camp Piomingo, we give youth ages 6-16 a safe place to belong, where they build confidence and learn positive behaviors through the Y core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. We offer an exciting, safe community for young people to explore the outdoors, build self-esteem, develop interpersonal skills and make lasting friendships and memories.

Surrounded by nature, we employ a "family" philosophy at Camp Piomingo that trickles down into every activity, every moment of every day. Whether the campers are working with cabin mates to tidy their bunks and cabins, eating meals together at the dining hall and deck, or helping one another improve their swimming skills or negotiate a challenging rock climb, campers learn very quickly to be self-reliant, responsible and respectful of one another. Kids "unplug" from phones and social media at Camp Piomingo; they rely solely on face-to-face communication to interact, learn it's okay to be themselves, and develop group skills. It's through this sense of family unity that campers learn to work together and build important social skills, instilling confidence in others while learning to also believe in themselves.

In fact, I've noticed that one thing our campers remember most, and that has the greatest impact, are the experiences they share with fellow campers and their caring counselors. It's those close bonds, relationships, and sense of community that mean the most to them. In many cases, they leave camp with new friends who will be friends for life.

Over the course of even one week, I've watched with amazement how much kids can learn when they are having fun. Everything we offer within our carefully structured learning environment provides campers with opportunities to develop into leaders, improve their overall health and establish healthy habits, and learn important lessons about social responsibility.

Our new aquatic center allows swimming to become a lesson in self-esteem as well as an important skill. Our equestrian program is one of the best in the region because it teaches kids so many things about themselves through the responsibility of learning to respect animals and take care of the horses. Along with daily routines such as raising the flag each morning, all of our activities, including archery, rock climbing, pottery, mountain boarding, canoeing and more, provide a thrilling learning experience – within a safe, positive environment.

At the end of each week, we have a final campfire ceremony where the kids say farewell to their camp experience and celebrate their accomplishments, large or small. Perhaps the greatest lesson they learn is that even as the fire goes out - the experiences, the newfound confidence, the memories and the friendships remain for a very long time, likely for the rest of their lives. We see them grow on the inside while being outside; it is truly an experience that becomes a life lesson.

And, like all memberships and programs at the Y, Camp Piomingo is for everyone. We recognize that for communities to succeed, everyone must be given the opportunity to be healthy, confident, connected and secure. We have flexible payment options and offer financial assistance to those who qualify; we look forward to welcoming each and every new camper.

I challenge parents and kids everywhere to embrace the outdoors this summer as a way to be active, develop individually, and enjoy time together as a family. It will make a difference in your lives.

Steve Merifield, Executive Director