



The Camp that Cares

By Lillian Ling

“Every child should have that opportunity.” Dr. Saul Lieberman, coordinator of Camp Attaway, speaks of the chance for children to experience success. Camp Attaway, in Columbia, is a summer program dedicated to helping children with emotional/behavior issues to learn social skills and build independence while providing them with a safe and fun environment.

In 1996, Lieberman was shocked at the lack of camps for children with emotional needs in the area. “As a child I went to camp year after year after year, and it was a very positive experience.” He took that idea and created a “vision,” a three-week summer day camp from Monday to Friday where certain children ages 7 to 13 can experience the fun and friendship they have been deprived of most of their lives.

Nine years later, he recalls, “Watching them come to camp was a truly special moment for me.” With the help of good friend Professor David Cooper from the University of Maryland, College Park, he “made Camp Attaway a reality,” a place where children accustomed to failure would have a chance to experience success and achievement. Since then, the camp has grown tremendously in size and reputation. Previously, the campers were mostly boys; however that is slowly changing. In addition, “Last year we had campers come from six counties - Howard County, Montgomery County, Prince George’s County, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County and Carroll County.” Slowly but surely, Camp Attaway is growing at a comfortable pace, becoming one of the leading local summer programs for children with psychosomatic issues.

Born from one man’s imagination, Camp Attaway has evolved into a success story; though, “initially, it was challenging,” due to funding and location issues. However, grants and a joint effort with Howard County Recreation and Parks provide the camp with its necessary resources. As a thank you, Lieberman says Camp Attaway “is a great way to give back to the community.”

“There’s a two-to-one ratio of campers to counselors,” Lieberman states; thus, the campers receive “a lot of support, guidance and positive feedback” from the focused attention of the counselor to camper. Counselors are usually “individuals pursuing a degree in special education, counseling and psychology.” They range from students in undergraduate school, graduate school, or adults already working in the field. Three days prior to camp, the

counselors receive “prevocational” lessons and “physical strength training.” Thereafter, everyone on staff is well prepared to handle any challenges that come their way.

The counselors chaperone and aid campers in various activities Camp Attaway provides: indoor rock climbing, swimming, games and the arts. These activities are meant to foster basic social skills, cooperation and confidence within the campers. However, Camp Attaway is also a learning experience for both counselors and campers. In the upcoming summer, six to eight counselors will be returning from previous years. They benefit from Camp Attaway just as much as the campers; they “leave feeling positive, it was a positive experience for them,” explains Lieberman.

In addition to camp counselors, a special segment of child officers called Counselors in Training, CIT for short, is for children who have completed their fourth year at Camp Attaway. For these children, “It really gives them a chance to step up and demonstrate what they’ve learned” at camp, Lieberman said. “It shows the campers currently attending how to behave and how to overcome their emotional difficulties with success.” The CIT are a welcome addition to the staff, because, as Lieberman jokingly states, “the staff is tired at the end of the day.” On a more personal level, the “kids really relate to CIT because they’ve been in the kids’ shoes.”

In the past, part of the camp’s program was Earth Trek, an indoor rock climbing facility. CIT underwent special training for this particular activity and acted as the “belay.” They supported and observed the climbers, providing help to their teammates. This activity’s purpose was to create a strong sense of mutual support and trust between the CIT and campers and, in addition, to develop their coaching skills and goal-setting processes and increase self confidence. Like Camp Attaway in relation to the community, the CIT program “is a good way for the children to give back to Camp Attaway,” Lieberman said.

As for the campers, “they come away feeling successful, good about themselves,” according to Lieberman. They arrive with “different diagnoses, attention difficulty, depression and anxiety,” but with a team of specially trained individuals, each camper is treated with care and special attention.

Unlike many other camps of this type, Camp Attaway wants to get parents involved by providing an additional support group for parents led by Larry Smith, another professional within the field. Midway through the program, a parent conference is held to chart progress. At the end of camp, Lieberman and the staff throw a “big barbecue,” a family potluck dinner that, according to camp officials, happens to be “one of the biggest and [most] well-attended events” Camp Attaway has to offer.

A parent education support group is held during the course of the camp to give them a chance to pull together and swap ideas and techniques to manage behavior. In the past, at the post-camp feedback and evaluation conference, parents had only positive feedback to describe their Camp Attaway experience. According to one parent, “My son so benefited. We see such a positive difference in all aspects of his life. As parents we loved the support for the parents.

We can't wait for next summer.”

As for the future of Camp Attaway, this upcoming summer will be “our 10th year of Camp Attaway,” says Lieberman. He wants “to grow in terms of number of kids and space” to ensure that more children can be helped. For more information, visit the camp’s web site at <http://campattaway.org>.

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