

August 11, 2016

Peace & Unity Camp 2016

hosted by the Institute for Peace Studies

We will begin with the expected (hoped for), listed outcomes, but we have much more to share. Peace Camp 2016 saw years of work come together in the most amazing manner. We are all still a bit astounded.



Our first listed outcome focused on improved communication skills. Without a single doubt, we achieved this with every camper – some more than others – but every single one. To ensure this skill developed at an optimum level, we added a “grown-up” to our staff. Art Lusse joined us, working specifically on improved communication. This daily session was fun, it was unique, it was effective. As an adjunct professor at RMC, Art is used to a college classroom. This, however, did not stop him from wearing our uniform t-shirt and adding mouse ears to appeal to our age range. Our two college age counselors (Morrie – MSU and Kyle MSU-Billings) worked beside Art and had our campers role playing in a notably uninhibited style. All of us enjoyed being a “star”, while learning and experiencing. It was a positive addition.

Our outcome that hoped to see campers relax and enjoy our international guests was equally successful. It helped that one of our guests from India was just their age. Our visitors from Madagascar and Netherlands were fun and sang to the campers – never a bad thing. Having Benson (Kenya) and Kasra (Iran) with them on a daily basis was very effective. A super bonus was all the former Institute staff members (previous Peace Camp counselors) who accepted our invitation to come have lunch and visit. Andris (Hungary), Judith (Haiti), Peterson (Haiti), and Noah (Kenya) spent time with us over the lunch hour and enthralled the youngsters. And, not to leave out the U.S., former volunteer, Brooke joined us on her day off and Dianna took one of the daily international sessions to share the delights and challenges of life on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. We can say without qualification that our campers learned much about our Global Community (as did counselors and volunteers) and seemed very comfortable with men and women of color, guests who had accents, and with different styles of dress. We were pleased with the attitudes in evidence and the obviously comfortable conversations taking place after our guests left for the day.



Nutrition played a major role. Our board members and “lunch ladies” outdid themselves in an effort to help campers (from all backgrounds and home situations) see food as a resource – as an investment in their physical health – as a direct link to their emotional well being – and as an adventure. Nikki’s daily nutrition sessions focused on colors rather than Vitamin B Complex issues... and the student participation impressed all of us. There didn’t seem to be any question that the campers saw the direct link between being hungry and being crabby or eating chocolate and coke for breakfast and ending up in an argument at lunch. It was rewarding to see how open they were and how cooperative they were creating colorful lunch plates. Watermelon pizza was a highlight, for certain. We are more than satisfied with the results of the goals and outcomes we had set in place for nutrition’s role.



Unexpected outcomes:

While visiting with former staff members who drop in when in our area, Benson and Kasra quickly learned that Peace Camp was a favorite program of many. They talked about some of the challenges and some of the funny, unexpected successes. They shared how much they had personally learned about basic manners and positive communication in difficult situations... lessons they have used as adults - even improved nutrition. It was rewarding, to say the least, to be listening in on these conversations. We knew the counselors and staff members were being influenced but to hear them acknowledge this was the “icing on the cake” for us. One of the conversations took place on the walking mall in Helena – as soon as everyone realized Peace Camp was just weeks away. Amazing!



Another surprise has come in the mail. Ivy sent along a thank you note expressing her appreciation for a week of learning “neat stuff”. Sara’s card had an example of her best art work. Pretty thank you cards arrived from both Emma and Leela. Jayden left behind a smudged and wrinkled letter that he pulled from his shorts pocket at the end of camp. Our counselors took the time to tell us how much they appreciated being with us and our volunteers who helped throughout the week were impressed by the progress the children were making and told us so over and over. We usually receive an expression of gratitude from a parent or guardian and there is often a special hug or thank you, but never to this extent. We have all been touched.



Another outcome we feel bears mentioning was the sense of empathy and the clear feeling of being a “village” this year. So (so) many of our youngsters came to us with problematic diagnoses (Autism, seizures, ADHD, ODD, ADD, anxiety). As we worked on walking in each other’s shoes and on accepting our imperfect selves (while we continued to work on improving) – the sense of empathy naturally carried over to others. We were pleased that at this age, campers were capable of this. We were clearly teams and teams were clearly a camp. Even guests commented on the positive atmosphere.

Finally, we want to share our environmental success. We planted a Peace Grove a number of years ago. We share with the children photos of the trees’ growth and talk with them about future campers who will benefit as, together, we water the trees. This is the opportunity to talk about recycling at their level of understanding and to challenge them to turn off the water while brushing their teeth or to think twice before littering. Because of the excessive heat during camp week, our “end of camp celebration” was enjoying a movie (The Lorax) all about the value of trees and clean air while we ate popcorn and relaxed together. Again, their interest and understanding was impressive.



Past successes at Peace Camp have provided a large pool of volunteers. We utilized every one, with Good Morning Grown-ups, Good Bye Grown-ups, Lunch Helpers, Guest Presenters, Cooks, and more. This helps ensure we are fresh and ready for the challenges that come our way and made working with the special needs campers a possibility.



Thank you for believing in this important program. We are planting seeds and they will bear fruit.... In fact, they already are.