

Mission Trips to Bethesda Camp Engage Youth



This summer, Tasha Becker (left) was paired with Allen Grosenick. The two enjoyed relaxing on the many swings at Camp Matz.

BY NICHOLAS L. HONECK

The Rev. Russ Grabau, pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran, Waterville, Minn., was determined to challenge his youth group by finding a summer mission trip that would put their faith into action.

He decided the group would volunteer at Camp Matz in Watertown, Wis., a Bethesda Lutheran Communities camp for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The weeklong experience was life-changing for the teens.

The conversations on the trip home were electric. A renewed energy in the teens' faith and a desire to ask more of themselves as Christians was revealed. For Pastor Grabau—mission accomplished.

"Kids grow at Camp Matz, not only because they are out of their comfort zone, but because they are out of their norm—they are putting others before themselves and exploring their faith on a daily basis," Pastor Grabau said. "After coming to Camp Matz, our youth seek avenues to serve others. It enlivens the whole church."

That first trip was 13 years ago. Camp Matz is now a regular summer destination for the St. Peter's youth group. Over the years, more than 50 youth and adults affiliated with the 200-person rural congregation have been to Camp Matz, experiencing the power of Bethesda's camp ministry.

"It is the relationships our kids develop with people who have developmental disabilities that makes

Camp Matz unique and keeps us coming back," Pastor Grabau said. "There's a personal connection at camp that makes the experience resonate long after our group has returned home."

Camp Matz, a wooded 17-acre campground, is one of four Bethesda Camp and Retreat Ministry locations. Each summer, nearly 1,000 youth and adult volunteers, adults with developmental disabilities, and camp staff gather at Camp Matz, Bethesda Mountain Builders in Woodland Park, Colo.; Camp Bethesda, Tomball, Texas; and SonRise, Anderson, Ind.

After a day of orientation for volunteers, adult campers with developmental disabilities arrive.

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For Norman Rude (left) and Ryan Schafer, the fun began right away. The two took part in a game shortly after they met at Camp Matz.

From then on, each volunteer is paired one-to-one with a person with a developmental disability.

According to Deaconess Katie Willman, director of Camp Matz, the program is unlike most mission trips because it challenges youth on different levels.

"Many mission trips center around physical labor," Willman said. "Volunteering at Camp Matz can be physically challenging, but it is also emotionally and spiritually challenging. Teens come away transformed because they really put themselves into the development of a relationship. They are learning how to be servant leaders at a very pivotal life stage, when many kids are mostly thinking of themselves."

Rich Dividends

St. Peter's funds youth group mission trips to Camp Matz, and the investment has paid rich dividends.

According to Hope Grabau, leader of the St. Peter's youth group and wife of Pastor Grabau, many lessons are learned every summer at Camp Matz, even if some of them are not immediately recognized.

"Everyone's story is a little bit different," Hope Grabau said. "There are some people who might not realize for several years what Camp Matz did for them. Some of these teens are happy when camp is over, but a seed has been planted. Often, the kids who didn't want to come in the first place are the ones who get the most out of it."

Several youth from the St. Peter's youth group have turned the passion they developed at camp into a job or internship.

"We've seen 10 kids who came to Camp Matz with us find jobs in group homes," Hope Grabau said. "There are so many doors that open once you shed your fears and get outside your comfort zone."

Laura Wesley was 13 years old when she volunteered at Camp Matz with one of the first groups from St. Peter's. Now a college senior, Wesley has spent the last five years working in a group home with adults who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"My week at Camp Matz was difficult and rewarding," Wesley said. "To me though, it was worth it

whenever I put a smile on someone's face. It really solidified my desire to work with people."

Wesley credits her experience at Camp Matz with preparing her for the job. "I knew I could do it because I spent a week at Camp Matz," Wesley said. "I knew people with developmental disabilities. I had experience. It made me very comfortable."

After working in a group home, Wesley has a deeper appreciation for her Bethesda camp experience.

"Group homes can be really busy," she said. "There is not always time for activities, so when people go to camp and they have a friend with them for a week, it truly makes a huge impact on people with disabilities. I wish I could take some of the people I support to a place like Camp Matz."

Even teens who do not seek a career in the field develop skills applicable in everyday life.

"Not every mission trip offers an experience that can affect kids on a day-to-day basis after they return home," Hope Grabau said. "At camp, youth learn skills they can use daily.

When they see someone with a disability in their community, they recall the positive experiences they've had at camp and are more likely to make a connection with that person."

Renewed faith

This summer, Hope Grabau led an 11-person group from St. Peter's, including three first-time attendees, on the 300-mile trek to Camp Matz.

At Camp Matz, dynamic worship services and Bible studies bring together music and prayer. The focus on faith, spirituality and Christian community with people who have developmental disabilities resonates with teens, according to Hope Grabau.

"At camp, we are deliberately taking joy for the Lord during worship to another level," she said. "Some kids respond so strongly because they haven't felt that before. We go to a pretty traditional Lutheran church and sing our hymns. We aren't dancing in the pews. Here the kids are dancing and that experience has a big impact on them."

In August, Ryan Schafer, a 16-year-old football player from Cleveland, Minn., served at camp for the second time.

Schafer was paired with Norman Rude, an adult camper. From the moment Rude arrived, he was open about his spirituality—making a cross with sticks and always participating in the group prayer.

"Norman showed me it is okay to express faith however you would like," Schafer said. "During one of the worship services, Norman tried to get me involved. I don't typically

express my faith so publicly. If he wasn't there, I wouldn't have put myself out there."

Schafer intends to be more expressive about his faith—and return to camp next summer. Pastor Grabau has seen many youth, like Schafer, increase their willingness to share their spirituality after a Bethesda camp experience.

"Kids are more comfortable speaking about their faith after coming out to Camp Matz," he said. "That is a reflection of seeing how demonstrative many people with developmental disabilities are about worshipping God."

Lessons in leadership

"The spiritual component of Camp Matz opens groups up to asking more out of themselves as servants," Willman said. Youth-group leaders have witnessed teens overcome obstacles, grow in self-confidence and become leaders.

The result is a more engaged youth ministry.

The St. Peter's youth group participates in servant events each month, regularly volunteer at vacation Bible school, and has developed a program to interact with the elderly. Pastor Grabau directly attributes this to their time spent at camp.

Tasha Becker was a shy 12-year-old when she first volunteered at Camp Matz. That first summer, Becker was challenged by being paired with a woman who communicated non-verbally.

"I was really nervous and outside of my comfort zone," Becker said. "I don't think the nervousness



Robyn Posorske (left), Kaytie Bath and Emily Stone enjoyed meeting at Camp Matz.

Paid Internships Available for College Students

This summer, Bethesda Lutheran Communities will hire more than 40 interns for its camps in Colorado, Indiana, Texas and Wisconsin. The interns put their faith into action by staffing weeklong camp sessions where all participants experience the power of God's love and Christian community.

Emily Stone, Pulaski, Wis., a sophomore at Concordia University Wisconsin, served as an intern this summer at Camp Matz. In her previous five summers as a volunteer at Bethesda's SonRise camp ministry, Stone looked to the interns as role models.

"They make things run smoothly," Stone said. "They are there when you need them. I wanted to be an intern because of the community they form. It is so magnetizing. You see interns being genuine with each other, and you want friends like that. They were very encouraging.

"I've really learned about being a leader. It is amazing to see the impact we have on the volunteers, people with developmental disabilities and each other."

Intern applicants must have sophomore status or higher at an accredited college or university at the time the internship begins. The interns earn a \$3,000 stipend during the 10-week summer. Prior volunteer experience at a Bethesda camp or retreat is a plus.



www.BethesdaLutheranCommunities.org/Camp-Internships



Photo: John Hart

Austin Prior (left), Craig Franswick and Hope Grabau celebrated a successful round of extreme bingo.

went away until the last days. Once I started to figure out how to communicate with her, I was proud for both of us."

Six years later, Becker is a seasoned veteran of the group, always willing to jump in and help.

"After a week of seeing people in your youth group do things you didn't know they could do, you have a shared experience," Becker said. "That is a big thing to take back home with you."

After 11 summers, the Grabaus estimate nearly 75 percent of the kids—including each of their five children—return for more than one summer. Their daughter, Lydia Grabau, 22, has volunteered at Camp Matz every summer since she was 12, and spent the last three years as a summer intern. For Lydia Grabau, Camp Matz has played a critical role in the person she is.

"I still see 12-year-old versions of myself running around sometimes,"


Grabau said. "I see where I was and who I've become. Camp Matz has formed me as an adult. Many things that are good about me are directly related to my work here. Any patience I have, I learned at camp. My honesty and wholeness is from the friends I've made. The kindness is God working through me and seeing the way our friends with disabilities are kind."

Plans are underway for the St. Peter's group to return in the summer of 2014. The small congregation finds Camp Matz an affordable mission trip that offers faith formation, fun and fellowship.

"Camp Matz has been a blessing for us," Pastor Grabau said. "When you are a small rural congregation, it is easy to feel like meaningful mission trips are out of reach. Being a part of the community at Camp Matz has demonstrated to our teens and our congregation that we can all make a difference."

Bethesda Camps and Retreats Need YOU

Each summer, hundreds of volunteers—of all ages—join the Christian community of Bethesda Camp Ministries and help build meaningful experiences with people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities. Congregational youth groups, individuals, families, and other groups serve in vital volunteer roles, such as kitchen help, nurses, cabin leaders and companions. In addition to summer camp sessions, volunteers are needed to join SonRise weekend retreat sessions offered in Anderson Ind., between September and April.

 www.BethesdaLutheranCommunities.org/Camp-Volunteers