

CAMPERS COURAGEOUS Published on July 12, 1998

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A few days after Joe Fowler returned from summer camp, his step-mother noticed that he wasn't using any of the things that he took to camp. "He wasn't wearing any of his camp clothes, and I couldn't find his comb and toothbrush," Frances Fowler said. After searching in Joe's room, she discovered the missing things -- under his bed in a suitcase, packed and ready for camp for next year. He had totally packed everything right down to his flashlight and razor," Mrs. Fowler recalled. Eight years later Fowler of Henderson, Ky., still prepares months in advance for summer camp, and his sheets, towels and pillow never leave the suitcase beneath his bed.

This is no traditional church or basketball camp. Instead, 31-year-old Fowler goes to Anderson Woods, a summer camp for mentally and physically disabled adults. For eight weeks every summer, Judy and David Colby open their rural Spencer County home and their 175-acre farm to dozens of **campers** from around the country.

The camp, which is open near St. Meinrad, Ind., from mid-June to mid-August, can accommodate 14 **campers** for each of the eight four-day sessions. In addition to the summer camp, Anderson Woods operates three group homes; two in Siberia, Ind., and one in Bloomington, Ind.

In developing the summer camp, the Colbys have created a philosophy, a way of treating people with compassion, care and unconditional love.

They designed the camp to be a place to reflect, pray, sing, love and grow. And it has become a place where the **campers** can work and learn the extent of their abilities.

Lush green woods, winding nature trails, open green pastures and vegetable gardens stretch for 175 acres, forming the landscape for Anderson Woods.

The **campers** spend their mornings gathering eggs, collecting berries and picking ripe vegetables from the Colbys' organic garden. Some **campers** also can vegetables and make jam .

After lunch, **campers** walk llamas, pet goats or watch peacocks up on the high green pastures.

"I love animals," said 28-year-old Marisa Thompson, who was attending the camp for her second year. "I work at an animal center in Jasper, and I love to spend time with all of the animals here."

"I love feeding the goats and helping out in the garden," said Judy Carrico, 50, of Owensboro, Ky., in her first year of camp. "I love to work."

Building a routine is part of camping here. Every day **campers** make their beds, set the table, wash dishes and even help prepare Anderson Woods' collection of home-grown recipes.

The camp is structured to give the mentally and physically disabled adults the time to accomplish what they are able to do.

"We really stress process over product," said Mrs. Colby. "The **campers** can really do anything; the key is to give them the time to do it."

For Fowler, Anderson Woods represents a chance to experiment in the kitchen - something he loves to do.

"At home I really don't let him cook, because I can do it a lot faster," said Mrs. Fowler.

But at Anderson Woods, Fowler does most of his own cooking, plus he cooks for others.

"So many parents are amazed at how much their children can really do," said Mrs. Colby. "They just don't give them a chance to do it."

Part of the plan of Anderson Woods is to tailor the experience for each individual **camper**, allowing each a choice of activities which fits each adult's ability .

For the four days that they are at Anderson Woods, each of the 14 **campers** experiences something unique.

Some may spend a few hours frolicking in the camp's swim hole, while others head to the Colbys' pond with fishing pole and bait in hand.

But no one has to do anything that he doesn't want to do.

"We had one **camper** named Dannv who said he hated the water," recalled Colby. "I didn't pressure him at all. and

...and one camper named Jimmy who said he liked the water, ...later when I went down to the swimming hole, there he was, swimming and playing with the others, with a big smile on his face."

"Anderson Woods gives them an environment to expand and grow," he said.

Joe Farmer, a 53-year-old Owensboro native, is blind and suffers from severe physical disabilities .

Because of these limitations he cannot swim, but he was able to wade in the shallow water of the swimming hole.

"I know what my limits are and I know that I can't swim," he said. "But, I try to do what I can do, and I don't worry about the rest."

And Farmer has something he can share with the camp -- his gift for music .

Farmer, who was attending the camp for the first year, has three fingers on each hand, and those have restricted movement.

But he was able to use them to draw symphonic melodies from his keyboard . In the process, he demonstrated potential that each **camper** has.

As Farmer played song after song on the electronic keyboard, fellow **campers** joined hands, singing along.

One **camper** gently swayed to the music, and another leaned over to a counselor and silently whispered, "I love you."

"I love everything about here," said first-time **camper** Shannon Mahoney of Owensboro. "I really love Joe's music."

Later at night, at the high pasture cook-out, the music drew others out.

As counselor Anna Clark of Uniontown, Ky., strummed the guitar, **campers** Tom Yeary of Sulphur, Ind., and Butch Freels of Owensboro beat on the old bamboo drum.

Others joined in, and soon the eclectic mix of instruments and voices united to form one harmonious sound.

Counselors say it is that harmony and the love and smiles they get from **campers** that make them volunteer. The camp depends exclusively on volunteers.

In exchange for their eight weeks of patience, four college students receive scholarships for one year of tuition to the college of their choice as long as they are pursuing a degree in a caring field .

In addition to these four students, dozens of others volunteer as cooks and junior counselors, or simply help get the camp ready every spring.

"I met Judy seven years ago at church and asked if I could help at all," said Ms. Clark. "I plan to be with Anderson Woods for the rest of my life in some capacity."

"My favorite part of camp is the staff," Yeary says with a smile.

"My best friends are up here."

At the close of each day **campers** and staff reflect about their day.

For volunteer cook Adam Stenftenagel, 23, of Jasper, Ind., it's the smiles on **campers'** faces which mean the most.

For Mrs. Colby, it's seeing her dream transformed into reality.

And for Ms. Carrico, just being alive is all that she needs.

"The Lord gave me a life journey and I thank him for all that he does for me," she said. "God put me here, and I love it."