
Preparing our youth for an uncertain world

July 10, 2022



“Who are you? What you told me was just your name.”

This is the question that comes up for every child that interviews for Gateway Education’s summer day camp. After a 20 minute interview that includes time for camper questions, the child is expected to call the director within 24 hours and make the decision of if they would like to come to camp or not without the influence of parents, siblings or friends.

Ages range from 9 to 18 years. Additionally, the kids are informed they will have the skills to survive for three days with no equipment after the camp is over and that they will experience a sense of their true self. This is a high bar to meet that most of us can’t say we experience until much later in our lives.

The interview goes on to anticipate the issue of bullying - what the director addresses as our “inability to be that extraordinary, powerful, unique and beautiful person we know we are but can’t be due to the fear of being bullied or put down.”

“What if I told you there was a place you could be your Self?” he asks. “Would you believe me?” The obvious response is, “If I can’t be myself at school or home, how am I supposed to feel safe enough to be me at camp?”

A good question. A fair question. What occurs next is an explanation of Gateway’s Camp CORE.

C is for Choice. You always have a choice at camp to participate or not. You also have to make the choice to go to camp as noted earlier.

O is for the One Rule, which is a zero tolerance for creating an unsafe physical or emotional environment. As this is one of the centers around which the camp environment is created, it bears some exploration. There are no warnings at camp. The consequence for breaking the rule is that the camper is sent home for the rest of the week.

The kids are informed they will hear this three times; once in the interviews, once the week before camp when their parents receive the Launch Sheet outlining the things they will need at camp and to go over the One Rule with their child, and on the first day of camp. After this, they will never hear it again.

They are informed they are too smart to need more than the three times they receive this information. The flip side of this harsh sounding rule is the child can return to the following week's camp, next months program or next years camp free of charge and judgment so that they can learn the lesson of acceptance.

The child is informed that it is not themselves that the program has an issue with, it's only the act of harm that they made.

R is for what Gateway considers to be one of the most important elements of life. How good or how crappy your life is is based on how you hold your Relationships. An example of this is, "If you want to learn how to survive you must have a healthy relationship to yourself and to Nature, as they work together."

The last letter of the CORE is E, which stands for the philosophy "Everything happens for a reason." If you're not at camp, you're not supposed to be. Be present wherever you are and maybe come next year. Otherwise, we expect to see you at the County Library parking lot at 7:50 a.m. - assuming you choose to go.

The camp goes to different locations each day where campers learn the order of survival and the skills to generate friction fires and build shelters using local materials.

They are expected to bring their own non-disposable plate, fork, bowl, cup and water bottle. Meals are mostly organic and locally sourced when available and cooked fresh in the camp locations each day.

Campers also learn and practice the skills of moving silently through the woods, experience the physical and emotional benefits of being immersed in Nature and learn to listen to the quiet inner voice through the stories they hear and the games that depend on listening to that intuitive voice.

The activities grow in scope and difficulty each day so it isn't a surprise to see that many of the evaluations completed by campers at the end of camp report a greater sense of confidence in themselves.

Gateway has been facilitating this camp for 20 years, started by transplant Ron Cole after his time in AmeriCorps. He credits the program's success to many, acknowledging the gifts of Kirsten Randrup, Matt Lawrence, Jaia Hudson, John Nolan and others who have contributed to the programs unique design and approach.

Even Covid-19 could not stop the growth of Gateway. In 2020 Gateway received a generous grant from Building Healthy Communities and the California Endowment to continue and expand its programs. Gateway utilized these grants to create an outdoor experience program for foster youth with Redwood Rides, generating short term adventures through a Choose Your Own Adventure Program, the expansion of the Coyote Disc Golf Program and the launch of their first youth entrepreneurship program.

Gateway started the Pastels in the Park event in 2002 when it was discovered that there were youth who wanted to attend camp but could not afford it. Through this program patrons such as businesses, professionals, individuals and groups who are interested in sending youth to camp are identified. Patrons are then matched with accomplished artists within the community who create a work of art as a means to express Gateway's appreciation for these scholarships which provide opportunities for kids to attend camp. In addition, works of art are on display for the public at Beachfront Park each July 4th and have become a tradition the greater community looks forward to each year.

The memories of Summer Camp are always an exciting point in our lives. The offerings of these summer camps are unique in the experiences provided as well as the opportunities for all children who have the desire to attend camp being able to do so due to scholarships offered from the community. I wish I was a kid again so I could go to these camps.

When asked about Gateway's future the director replied that many have asked if he could expand the program, even to other states. His response is that exploring the emotional landscape and the Self are not unique or endemic to the area. He encourages sharing the concepts and approaches utilized and which seem to work for Del Norte County, but that other leaders must identify what unique approaches are needed for their areas.

Ron Cole is founder and president of Gateway Education Program in Del Norte County. He can be reached at 707-954-7666, email: RonCole8@gmail.com.