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### The Cost of being a Summer Camp Counselor

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*Ouachita Baptist University*

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# THE *COST* OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

Emily Payne

Ouachita Baptist University

*Will you  
recognize  
yourself at the  
end of the  
summer?*

2015

# THE COST OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

## INTRODUCTION:

*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

Every morning I wake up thinking, “I’m one day closer to camp.” As I write this there are 81 days till I return for my fourth summer as a counselor at Camp War Eagle in Rogers, Arkansas and that statement has never been truer. I look forward to working at camp each summer like a child looks forward to Christmas morning. Each year I have to complete an application which contains the question, “Why do you want to return to Camp War Eagle?” And every year I am struck by the excellence of that question. What is it about the place that demanded more of me than I ever thought I could give, tested me beyond anything I ever imagined, and stretched me farther than I ever thought possible that makes me long to be *there* more than any other place in the world? What is it about blood, sweat, tears, mud, grass, mulch, stress, frustration, and sleep deprivation that make me want more? What is it that drives me back to long, hot days; too-short nights; and complete and utter exhaustion?

Maybe it’s that, like Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “Where you fall in love is home; home that your feet may leave, but never your heart.” Maybe it’s that somewhere out there in the middle of the woods, drenched in sweat, worn out with exhaustion, and completely and totally joyful is my heart. Poured out for others over and over, melted by innocence time and time again,

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uplifted in victory or crushed in defeat day after day, broken by partings week after week, it was left behind a little bit more moment by moment. Every time my character was tested and it proved its mettle, every time my strength was stretched and God showed up in a huge way, every time I became comfortable and God demanded growth, every time more was demanded and somehow I gave, every time I was asked to die to self and the reward was greater than the pain, every time I thought I might break but I only bent, every time I wanted to give up but I didn't, every time a child smiled at me, every time a child wanted me to be her best friend, every time a child succeeded at what he or she had never done before, every time a child's life was changed, and every time a child changed *my* life more, I fell in love a little bit deeper, and a little bit more of my heart no longer belonged to me.

When the time came to leave after that first summer, and I drove away, trying without success to keep from looking back, every moment that had come before, every long day, every short night, every disappointing defeat, every amazing victory, every true friend, every big smile, every tear, every drop of sweat, every painful sacrifice, every epic joy, every precious child, and every life forever changed, flashed back through my head, and the last little piece of my heart fled my body to fly back down that road, leaving an emptiness in its place and forming a wholeness only in the place where I realized the power of my maker, found out who I truly am, and finally discovered my purpose in changing children's lives.

Working as a counselor radically changed my life. I fell in love with Camp War Eagle, and it is the place to which I always long to return. It is this love that inspired my thesis topic. Aside from accepting Jesus Christ as my savior and choosing to attend Ouachita Baptist University (OBU), deciding to work at camp has been the single most life-changing decision I have made to date. It has also been one of the most *costly* decisions I have ever made; it cost me



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*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

everything. Working at camp forced me to give up selfishness and pride, and learn patience and compassion. I was forcibly pushed out of my comfort zone and thrown into situations that demanded I quickly develop whatever maturity and decision-making skills I lacked. At camp God stripped me of insecurities and identity issues I had carried for years and forced me to decide between what was easy and what was eternally meaningful. Working at camp cost me my prejudices and presuppositions, every ounce of energy I possessed and every inch of effort I was able to give, my false self-image, and my spiritual complacency.

Whatever baggage I was carrying when I went to camp was lost along the way, and many things I lacked I was forced to pick up. I distinctly remember that I was an entirely different person when I left camp than when I arrived. I believe that other people have experienced the same thing. I want to share their experiences, and mine, with other people—college students who might someday work at camp, the people whose children will attend camp in the future, and leaders in the industry who want to know more about the roots of the place they have come to love. I believe that summer camp is a life-changing place, for its staff as well as its guests, and I have set out to show just how true that really is.

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### HISTORY OF SUMMER CAMPS:<sup>1</sup>

The American summer camp movement has a relatively short yet fairly complicated history. From a small, rustic affair on the peaceful shores of a deserted New Hampshire island to a large, public YMCA camp just off a busy highway, summer camp has grown and developed into a thriving cultural landmark. Every summer thousands of children partake of great outdoor adventures and unique social immersion, returning home with sunburns, new friends, and the experience of a lifetime. But the development of this childhood paradise was the work of over 100 years and carries surprisingly heavy political and racial overtones.

The first summer camps were predominantly located on lakeside properties. Sometimes the land was owned by the camp director, but more often it was private land rented for the summer by a public group. Private camps focused on blending their facilities into nature and prided themselves on aesthetically pleasing environments, while public camps relied heavily on tents and utilized a simple, militaristic style. By 1927, most camps had abandoned the haphazard and military styles and sought to give campers “full benefit of the natural advantages” of the sites chosen for camps and facility arrangements. In the



*Photo Credit: Phantom Lake YMCA Camp*

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<sup>1</sup> All material in this section, “History of Summer Camps,” is taken in equal measure from the following resources: Paris, L. (2008). *Children’s nature: The rise of the American summer camp*. New York: New York University Press; Van Slyck, A. A. (2006). *A manufactured wilderness: Summer camps and the shaping of American youth, 1890 – 1960*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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earliest years of camping, tents were utilized in both public and private camps, since they were cheap, movable, and allowed for any type of arrangement.

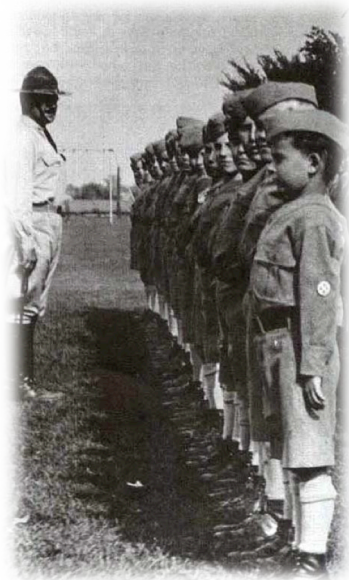
There were typically two to four campers and one counselor in each tent, though in the first years of camping, camp leaders believed small, crowded tents offered the best control and socialization of campers, especially boys. During the reign of the tent, there were also few permanent structures or specialized areas for recreation and sports. Kitchens and other facilities also came in a variety of permanent and non-permanent structures. Cooking was most often done over an open fire on a makeshift grill or portable oven, and campers were often heavily involved in the meal preparation process. At some camps, campers did all cooking and cleaning and ate off tin dishes, while other camps hired professional chefs and used fine dinnerware.

At the turn of the century, the discovery of the germ theory of disease sparked a revolution in camp facilities and procedures, which would prove to be a long process. The earliest attempts to raise health standards and improve sanitation practices at summer camps focused on providing access to clean drinking water, but changes were soon demanded in sleeping areas, kitchens, and toilet facilities as well. Camper housing moved from tents to cottages and canvas cabins with solid floors and canvas walls, which would eventually be replaced with the “wooden tent,” the earliest solid cabin. Soon the norm was the unit lodge in which seven or eight campers and one or two counselors resided.

Kitchens were also modified as greater precision and efficiency was ensured by the introduction of new fuel sources and appliances, and the removal of the camper from the meal preparation process. Toilets progressed from holes in the ground to wooden boxes with hinged lids, and finally to porcelain flush toilets. These toilets echoed the societal theme of white, non-porous household fixtures that could be sanitized effectively and created a clean, sterile look. At

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boys' camps cleaning was on an "if-needed" basis, allowing more time to be spent on other activities, while at girls' camps cleaning was a fixed daily routine. With these developments in health standards, inspections became more frequent, more camps required health screenings and physicals, and the summer camping industry gained more legitimacy and prestige. These changes were also accompanied by more permanent structures for camper recreation and specialized courts for various sports activities, as well as redesigned waterfronts that focused on safety and visibility.



*Photo Credit: Maj. Dick Zimmerman*

Early camps were styled after military culture with orderly rows of tents or living facilities, military-style uniforms, strict daily schedules, and numerous merit awards. After World War I there was a backlash against militarism and many camp leaders got rid of activities that seemed to be excessively militaristic. This opened the door for the Native American motif. The tipi was the first sign of "true Indianness" and some camps were structured around several different tribes, each with its own set of tipis and its own governmental structure. Many camps



*Photo Credit: Boy Scouts of America*

also had a "council ring," the exact nature of which varied depending on the gender of the camp. At boys' camps these were typically permanent, hierarchical structures, centrally

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located and featuring war dances and a council fire. At girls' camps there was rarely a permanent council structure, sites were often hidden from view, and there was less ceremony and ritual involved in its use. The Indian motif began to fade after World War II, though some camps retained it without emphasizing its heritage. Whatever the case, the tradition of "tribes" remained strongly ingrained at many camps and is still seen today. This fading underlined the fading of the "Indian problem" from the social stage. During this time other camps utilized the pioneer theme and camp architecture was dominated by the log cabin.

A child's entrance into the complex camp community is a process, not a one-time event. When campers arrive they don't know the lingo or the traditions and they must be introduced to camp custom. This creates unequal access to power and prestige, initially based on camp experience and tenure. Eventually this access to power becomes dependent on certain aspects such as age and skill. There is also a social hierarchy at summer camps, from the youngest camper to the most experienced staff member. Each rung of this ladder carries certain obligations and privileges that may seem more or less desirable from different positions in the hierarchy. Summer camp is removal from normal life into a "democratic space" where children can achieve based on their own abilities and talents. This is asserted by practices such as nicknames, which testify to new experiences and identities and show how children play a role in making camps places of personal transformation and untraditional ways of thinking about kinship.

In early camps the main goal was for children to be removed from the chaotic rat-race of society and spend the summer engaging in activities of their choice in an environment of their making. By the 1940's, camp leaders had begun experimenting with child psychology. One of these experiments took place at Camp Ahmek where Canadian Standard Efficiency tests were merged with woodcraft and Indian lore to form a program that awarded points, certificates, and

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badges to boys who met certain objectives of development and character building. The Behavior Frequency Scale, which had counselors assess each camper on 54 separate forms of behavior, was also introduced.

Camps were also highly gendered, with the earliest camps replicating the life of an individual in the real world. Boys' camps promoted activities and schedules that echoed a military-style life and comradeship. Early boy's camps were created to counteract the alleged feminization found in the Victorian era home. However, over time routines at boys' camps grew to include work that was normally assigned to women in the home. This was meant to confirm the self-sufficiency of men and paralleled the army's practice of assigning soldiers to various menial duties. At girls' camps meal preparation and kitchen duty rituals were structured to instill domestic habits that girls

would eventually practice in their own homes. Even within the Indian motif, activities were not focused on the hierarchical council fire, but on making pottery



*Photo Credit: W.K. Tate*

and sewing clothes. Girls were also held to higher standards of cleanliness and orderliness, and enjoyed fewer freedoms at camp than did boy campers at the respective camps. Both genders practiced cross-gender role play. At boys' camps, the men considered most masculine would dress up in women's clothing and make fun of feminine traits. However, at girls' camps, girls and their older counterparts dressed up as pirates or pioneers and played at being bold and courageous, applauding the masculinity of men.



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Camps also carried significant political undertones. Early camps were often segregated, with each camp being racially and socially homogenous. Part of creating an “authentic experience” at white-only camps often included cross-racial play, and indeed at many different camps, racial segregation of the camp itself went hand in hand with a fascination with and exploration of the culture and characteristics of groups that were marginalized from the camp “family.” At white camps, the main focus of the cross-racial play was the Native American culture. Native Americans were portrayed as noble people of nature, but effectively located the racial tension and differences outside of modern life, restricting a “primitive people” and their culture to the long-gone past. This allowed white-only camps to maintain a view of racial superiority and made it easier to instill such views in the children they served.

Today, some of the problems that characterized early camps are not nearly as prominent. The true Indian motif has all but disappeared, although the tribal theme and camp divisions are still quite popular. Children are generally isolated from anything that closely resembles the real world, manual labor for example, and are brought in to take a break from reality and learn to be a



*Photo Credit: Kanakuk Kamps*

kid. Gender roles are not a big deal any more, though in some specialized activities there are still divisions between activities offered to girls and boys. Tents are definitely a thing of the past, and the semi-rustic cabin is probably the most popular housing option. Health standards and safety

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regulations are a huge deal, and counselors and staff are thoroughly trained regarding policies and possible situations. At most camps there is really not a racial divide either, although some camps do a better job than others of catering to multi-racial clientele. There is a mixture of heavily structured activities and unstructured free-time that allows a child to exercise his or her creative taste without everything dissolving into chaos. Summer camps have come a long way since the late 1800s, but there is always improvement to be made.

### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE:**

My own summer camp experience began in 2008 at the Heart of America Fellowship of Christian Athletes camp on the campus of Mid-America Nazarene University in Olathe, Kansas.

This was my first time at a summer camp of any type.

I was fifteen years old, having just finished my first year of high school. I grew up in a Christian home, with loving parents and a strong church family. However, my parents are much older

*Photo Credit: Becky Patterson*

than me and there were only three other people in my church under the age of 45. I was starving for a mentor; a role model that was closer to my age and could really connect with me.



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Furthermore, though I didn't come from a broken home, was definitely well-loved and knew it, I was struggling to develop a picture of God and understand His love for me.

Fellowship of Christian  
Athletes (FCA) camps divide  
campers into huddles of 8-12, led  
by a college-age huddle leader.  
My huddle leader was Lori Keith,  
then a freshman at Missouri  
Western State University.  
Looking back I realize that Lori  
was barely three years older than  
me, but she seemed so mature and  
wise. She told my huddle and me  
that it was her first time to ever be

*Photo Credit: Becky Patterson*

a huddle leader, but she could have fooled me. Lori was loving, selfless, genuine, funny, and in my eyes, perfect. Though I didn't truly realize it at first, I was floundering in the ocean of life and Lori was a lifeline thrown to me by an incredibly benevolent God. Through Lori, God reached deep into my heart and healed the aching loneliness He found there. By her

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testimony and the example she lived, Lori helped me come to a new understanding of God and the unimaginable depth of His unconditional love that could radically change my life if I let it. Lori wasn't the only huddle leader to impact my life that week. Joining that list were Tanitra "Nitro" Bedford, Jessica "Stevie" Stephenson, and Sarah Brannock, among several others. These wonderful women of God showed me what life as a Christian was really about and how loved I truly was.

The next year I went to an FCA camp at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri. This time I was in a huddle led by Erica Deeney. Compared to the impact Lori had on my life, Erica barely scratched the surface, but I still loved her and craved her acceptance and her presence that week. In 2010 I went to my first FCA camp at Point 11 Christian Camping and Retreat Center in Shell Knob, MO, and would return the following year. This place and the people I found there changed my life forever. Looking back I am sure that God specifically brought three God-fearing women, who wrapped me in arms of love and spoke truth to my hurting heart, into my life that week – Karla Jordan, the Huddle Leader Coordinator for that

week, Sarah Singer, the counselor of another huddle that was close to mine, and Sindy Chavez, my own huddle leader. What made these women special was the fact that they were there, they

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allowed God to use  
them, they showed me  
that they loved me  
unconditionally, and  
they continued to pour  
into me over the next  
several years. It was at  
Point 11 that I first

*Photo Credit: Southern Missouri FCA*

knew I wanted to be a counselor someday. Two years later, in the summer of 2012, I would have my very first cabin of girls at an FCA camp at Point 11, and would return as a counselor there for the next two years.

The summer of 2012, following my freshman year at OBU, was the first summer I was eligible to serve as a camp counselor. The FCA camp at Point 11 was only one week out of the summer, but I needed to work the rest of the summer too. I knew I wanted to be a counselor, but I had my heart set on working at FCA camps, so when Kanakuk Kamps, Pine Cove, Sky Ranch, and several other camps came recruiting at OBU I paid them no mind. When recruiters from Camp War Eagle (CWE) appeared on campus, I knew I had heard that name before and mentioned it to my parents, who encouraged me to apply. Still holding out for more positions with FCA, I let the recruiters leave without talking to them. I thought the chance to work at CWE had passed and would not come again, but several months later Jen and Andy returned to campus looking to fill a few more spots at CWE. For some reason I'll never be able to explain I decided to sign up for an interview. Two weeks later, I was hired and set to work a month and a half at CWE during the summer of 2012.

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CWE's website describes the camp as a "Christian, sports, adventure and recreation summer camp for boys and girls ages seven to seventeen from Benton, Washington, Carroll and

*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

Madison counties in Northwest Arkansas. Located on the shores of beautiful Beaver Lake, Camp War Eagle is the place for children from Northwest Arkansas to have the time of their lives and gain a greater appreciation for God, themselves and others. The children returning home will then positively affect their families and the communities of Northwest Arkansas." CWE is a joint project of the Walton Family Foundation and Camp Ozark, a sister camp in Mount Ida, AR. Over 4000 children between the ages of seven and seventeen come through its gates over the course of each summer, to be met by a staff of roughly 450 college students and adults. Many of these children come from underprivileged and/or single-parent homes. For most, the week or two weeks they spend at camp is the highlight of their year, and most campers begin looking forward to returning the next year even before they leave.

A day at CWE begins bright and early with Wake Up at 7:15 a.m., followed by the Morning Show and breakfast. After breakfast, counselors supervise their campers in the cleaning of the cabin in hopes of winning Star Cabin for the day. At 8:40 Tribal Competition begins. Every person, camper or staffer, who comes to CWE is initiated into one of two tribes, the Caddo or the Osage. Each camper is placed on a small war party within his or her tribe, coached by two

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or three counselors from the same tribe. During Tribal Competition each war party squares off with a war party from the opposing tribe in an athletic competition. The outcome of each game

*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

counts toward each tribe's total score, and one tribe is declared the victor at the end of each session. At the end of the summer the tribe with the most session wins is the overall winner and gets to hang a banner in the main gym. Tribal Competition is one of the central features of the CWE program, and its purpose goes far beyond competition or just playing games. Throughout the week counselors strive to teach campers the "Three Flames": maximum effort, maximum enthusiasm, and true sportsmanship. CWE believes that these are qualities that children should display, not only on the field of competition, but in all areas of their life.

Following Tribal Competition, campers and counselors have time to relax and "chill out" before Morning Instructionals begin. There are three 30-minute Morning Instructional periods in which campers participate in activities including archery, riflery, mountain biking, nature classes, soccer, softball, baseball, volleyball, canoeing, bouldering, challenge course, ropes course, basketball, golf, tennis, swimming, playground games, fitness, hip hop dance, cheerleading, horsemanship, wakeboarding, sailing, candle making, stained glass, ceramics, pottery, rocketry, cooking, and woodworking. These activities are led by counselors trained in that area. Lunch and rest period provide a break in the middle of the day before the campers'

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favorite time of the day, Mish Mash—a good, old-fashioned free time, during which every activity in camp is open. Counselors are assigned to work a program area every other day, and are free to play with campers on their off-day.

When Mish Mash ends, everyone goes to dinner, which is followed by the nightly worship service. There are three worship services, each tailored to a specific age-group: Lifeline, for the youngest kids, Primetime for the middle ages, and Summit for the oldest. These worship services last from 30 to 45 minutes. After everyone is out of his or her worship service the Special Event for that night begins. Special Events are themed parties that occur every night.

*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

The themes for these parties include Western Night; Red, White, and Blue; Water World, and Planet Eagle. When the event ends campers and counselors return to the cabin for devotionals before turning out the lights at 10:30 p.m. and getting ready to do it all over again.

I will never forget my first real day at CWE. I had been at camp several days for Pre-Orientation, during which new staff members get certified in a program area. At the end of Pre-Orientation the returning staff comes back while new staff has a day off, and then new staff returns the next day to receive a proper CWE welcome. When I pulled up to the gates I joined a long line of cars already waiting to go in. I finally made it through the line, got a sticker on my

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windshield for the cabin I was supposed to go to and began the drive down the hill into camp. My windows were down, which I shortly realized was a big mistake, and as I got closer to the bottom of the hill I began to hear a lot of noise. I soon discovered the source of the noise as I came around the corner to see about 30 people dressed in camp shirts and shorts jumping up and down, screaming, shouting, and performing all sorts of weird acrobatics in the middle of the road. As my car approached they swarmed it, banging on the hood, jumping through the back seat, and physically shaking the entire car. My first thought was, “Oh boy. What have I gotten myself into?”

*Photo Credit: Camp War Eagle*

Three years later, camp rituals such as the welcome line on the opening day of Orientation have become important highlights of every summer. I am now one of those crazy people jumping on cars and risking toes and fingers to welcome new staff members to the greatest summer of their lives. As a returning staff member I am expected to help train new staff during Orientation, and share my wealth of knowledge with them. After three years, I am pretty familiar with the ins and outs of camp, the details of the daily schedule, every nook and cranny I might ever need to know about, and who to go to for particular kinds of problems. During the summer I am a leader in my cabins, and an example in coaching, instructing, and leading devotionals. Though my experience separates me in some ways from new staff, I still remember

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my first summer and the whirlwind of emotions I felt. I also still remember how different I felt by the end of the summer. I have always assumed that everyone who works at camp has a similar experience during their first summer at camp. It was this theory that I wanted to test by doing some research with new staff at CWE during summer 2014.

### **RESEARCH:**

#### Premise:

My research consisted of surveying counselors at Camp War Eagle during summer 2014, with the first session occurring at the beginning of the summer, and the follow-up session occurring at the end of each participant's employment period. The purpose was to see how individuals grow and develop socially, emotionally, and psychologically over the course of employment as a summer camp counselor.

#### Participants:

Participants in my survey were female cabin-counselors of varying ethnicities between the ages of 18 and 21, who were serving as a counselor for the first time, and had never been to

CWE. Participants worked either four, six, eight, or ten weeks. Daily responsibilities of each participant included:



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- Responsibility for 10-12 campers in a cabin, as well as other supervisory duties throughout the day.
- Teaching in one or several areas of the CWE program.
- Coaching a team in competition every day.
- Running an area of camp during Mish Mash, as well as spending time with campers when not on duty.
- Supervising activities during Special Events in the evening program, as well as participating in the Special Event activities with campers.
- Leading a nightly devotional using material provided by CWE.

Each participant resided in a cabin with 10-12 campers and one or two co-counselors, with new campers every one or two weeks, and new co-counselors every two weeks. Each participant received one day off during two week sessions and a day off in between each session.

Participants working six or more weeks may have served up to two weeks as a member of the S.W.A.T. team or the Day Camp Team. Members of S.W.A.T., which stands for Servants Working All Together, are responsible for cleaning bathrooms, emptying trash cans throughout the grounds, performing basic maintenance, and setting up and tearing down Special Events each evening. Members of the Day Camp Team live on campus in a special cabin, but are driven into town each morning to run a day camp at the Jones Center for Families in Springdale, AR.

Research Instrument:

### Informed Consent Agreement

Project Title: The *Cost* of Being a Summer Camp Counselor  
Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

The purpose of the study is to survey Camp War Eagle counselors at the beginning of the summer and again at the end to see how they have changed over the summer.

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You will spend about fifteen minutes in each session. The total experiment will require no more than thirty minutes.

There are no risks to you as a participant in this study.

This study is an attempt to qualify the value of being a counselor and the effect serving as a counselor has on an individual for use in a thesis project. It may even be helpful to help you process what you learn and how you grow over the course of the summer.

The information you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. Aggregate results will be published in a paper, but your name will never be used.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

If you have questions or concerns about the study, please contact:

Emily Payne  
OBU Box 4290  
410 Ouachita Street  
Ouachita Baptist University Arkadelphia, AR 71998-0001  
Telephone: (479) 966-7477

Terry DeWitt, Kinesiology and Leisure Studies  
OBU Box 3700  
410 Ouachita Street  
Ouachita Baptist University Arkadelphia, AR 71998-0001  
Telephone: (870) 245-5264

You may contact the following person regarding your rights in this study:

Detri Brech, Chair Institutional Review Board  
OBU Box 3769  
410 Ouachita Street  
Ouachita Baptist University Arkadelphia, AR 71998-0001  
Telephone: (870) 245-5543

I have read and understand this document and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered. I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like a copy of the aggregate results of this study, please contact Emily Payne.

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Pre-Camp Survey

Gender:

Male Female

Age:

18 19 20 21 22 23 24

Have you been a CWE camper?

Yes, # of years \_\_\_\_\_ No

Have you been a CWE counselor before this summer?

Yes, # of years \_\_\_\_\_ No

Have you served as a counselor at any other organization(s)?

Yes, name of organization(s) \_\_\_\_\_ No

Sessions working this summer (Circe all that apply):

1 2&3 4 5 6 &7

If you have served as a CWE counselor before, how did you see yourself change/grow over your first summer at camp?

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Why did you want to work at camp?

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What are you most excited about for this summer?

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What are you most nervous about for this summer?

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What is your biggest personal goal for this summer?

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What do you expect to be the biggest challenge for you this summer?

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Do you expect to be different in any way after serving as a CWE counselor? If so, how?

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Evaluate yourself on the following attributes/skills with “1” being very poor, “3” being acceptable, and “5” being excellent:

Patience

1      2      3      4      5

Self-discipline

1      2      3      4      5

Communication skills

1      2      3      4      5

Empathy and compassion

1      2      3      4      5

Decision-making skills

1      2      3      4      5

Teamwork

1      2      3      4      5

Ability to lead a devotional

1      2      3      4      5

Self-confidence

1      2      3      4      5

Humility

1      2      3      4      5

Problem-solving skills

1      2      3      4      5

THE COST OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

Post-Camp Survey

What three words would you use to describe your experience as a CWE counselor this summer?

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What area(s) of counselor training did you find most helpful?

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What area(s) do you wish you had received more training in before serving as a counselor?

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What skills/qualities did you develop as a result of your experience as a CWE counselor?

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What was the biggest challenge for you this summer?

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What was your favorite part of this summer?

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THE COST OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

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Is the person you are now different in any way than the person who came to camp at the beginning of the summer? If so, how? And did this meet your expectations?

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How has serving as a CWE counselor been unique compared to other experiences in which your leadership skills were developed?

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Please share one specific example of an experience you had this summer and how that experience led to personal growth:

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Do you feel the skills you learned/developed this summer can be applied to your life outside of camp? If so, how?

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## THE COST OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

Do you want to return to CWE next summer? Why or why not?

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Other comments on your experience as a CWE counselor, the lessons you learned, or the skills you developed:

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Evaluate yourself on the following attributes/skills with “1” being very poor, “3” being acceptable, and “5” being excellent AND, if applicable, describe what caused your growth in each area:

Patience

1      2      3      4      5

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Self-discipline

1      2      3      4      5

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Communication skills

1      2      3      4      5

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Empathy and compassion

1      2      3      4      5

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Decision-making

1      2      3      4      5

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Teamwork

1      2      3      4      5

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Ability to lead a devotional

1      2      3      4      5

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Self-confidence

1      2      3      4      5

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Humility

1      2      3      4      5

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Problem-solving skills

1      2      3      4      5

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## THE COST OF BEING A SUMMER CAMP COUNSELOR

### Survey Results and Discussion:

Participants gave a variety of reasons for wanting to work at CWE. Many said they needed a summer job that was fun and would keep them busy. CWE offered the chance to make money while getting to know people and working with children, an occupation many said they enjoyed. Almost every participant cited a desire to deepen her relationship with God and have the opportunity to serve Him. Several said they felt called to serve God in an area in which they could really make a difference and push themselves to get out of their comfort zone. Other reasons for wanting to work at CWE included the specific population targeted by the ministry, the opportunity to get experience coaching, and the camp atmosphere itself.

Having worked at camp I can attest that this is a pretty accurate picture of the motivations of summer staff. My dream of being a counselor grew out of a desire to impact children's lives in the same way my life had been impacted when I was a camper. I was also distinctly aware of the potential for spiritual growth at camp, and figured that I would grow closer to God during my time as a counselor. Though I was not originally interested in CWE, after I learned more about it I really liked the fact that it specifically targeted underserved children living in Northwest Arkansas. I spent the first 19 years of my life in that area, so it definitely holds a special place in my heart and I was excited to work with the children who live there.

Looking ahead to the upcoming summer, participants were excited about many things. Most of these related to relationships and the experience that the children were going to have. Specifically participants were excited to get to know their campers and their co-counselors, and see the ways that God would mold the hearts of everyone at camp. They were also looking forward to working with children and getting the opportunity to speak truth into their lives, build relationships with them, watch them grow, and see them try new things. Many participants were

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excited about being challenged in their faith and seeing how God would use them. While excited about the upcoming summer, every participant was also very nervous. Some really didn't know what to expect and said they were simply afraid of the unknown. Others were concerned with being the best counselor possible and were afraid of not living up to the expectations of their campers and the permanent staff, saying they were nervous about not having enough Bible knowledge, not knowing what to say, becoming exhausted and not being able to give 100%, letting their campers down, and giving into selfishness. Only a few participants were worried about getting homesick and rundown, and not making the most of every opportunity.

Like the participants in my survey I was excited about a lot of things going into my first summer at CWE, but I also had a lot of fears. Being a counselor was my first experience working directly with children, and I was definitely nervous about how that was going to go, but I remembered how much I admired and adored my counselors and was excited about being that mentor and friend for my own campers. I was somewhat nervous about having enough energy to make it through the summer, though I realized later that even then I really had no idea how hard and exhausting it was going to be. I was anxious about meeting new people, but once I got there and was put in a cabin with people I would work with I was very excited to get to know them. I can sympathize with the participants who said they were afraid of the unknown. When I arrived I didn't know anyone except Jen, the recruiter who hired me, and a few people from OBU; I didn't know how the schedule worked; I had never been in charge of a group of children; and I really had no idea what to expect. My fear of the unknown was very great. However, I was also extremely excited about what was to come and the new adventures that lay ahead.

When asked about her goals, almost every participant's biggest objective for the summer concerned her personal walk with the Lord, improving as a person, or the way she would serve

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the campers. Several said they wanted to be intentional with having personal devotions every day and growing in their knowledge of the Bible, which they hoped to accomplish by reading and meditating on Scripture. Many said they wanted to gain more confidence and be the kind of leader that sacrifices willingly and joyfully. Those focused on how they served the campers wanted to make sure that every child felt loved, be a good example and role model, and have a positive attitude in every circumstance.

Though most did not fully know what to expect, every participant expected to face numerous challenges over the course of her summer at CWE. Most of the challenges participants expected to be the greatest were internal struggles. Many felt being able to put aside emotions and distractions in order to put the campers first day after day would be their biggest challenge. Others expected to be most challenged by a lack of energy, enthusiasm, motivation, self-confidence or humility. I can say from experience that working as a counselor at any camp is a challenge. The biggest challenge is definitely overcoming the exhaustion that sets in after working for several weeks. This exhaustion is more than just physical, it is also mental and emotional, and depending on how intentional you are, is also very frequently spiritual as well. It is hard to be energetic and enthusiastic, and continue giving 100% when experiencing such complete exhaustion. It's much easier to be selfish and withdrawn, trying to conserve every ounce of strength just to survive. Another challenging part of camp is ignoring distractions. While it was one of my favorite parts of camp, working with so many fantastic people was one of the most difficult things, especially when I was worn out and emotionally bankrupt. My first instinct was to gravitate toward other counselors and spend time with them, since they require immensely less energy than campers do. The challenge a counselor faces is to continue to put the campers first and remember that while you are there to build relationships with other staff, and it

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is good to lean on them when you are struggling, making the campers' experience great takes first priority, and that requires being engaged with them at all times.

All of the participants expected that they would be different by the end of the summer. From experience I can say that most of their responses were spot on. As a person I was extremely different when I left at the end of the summer, and I felt much older and wiser. Most participants expected some form of growth in their spiritual lives such as better understanding how to completely rely on God, being more faithful in spiritual disciplines, and having a better grasp on sharing their faith with others. Many expected character traits to be developed, anticipating they would be more servant-hearted, more compassionate, a better leader, and more selfless and patient. One of the largest focuses of these expectations was relationships, as most participants hoped to have developed deep friendships that were teaching them to be more open about their fears and struggles.

I can honestly say that I was not as self-aware as many of these women were when I worked at camp for the first time. There were definitely areas in my life that I knew needed work, and things at camp for which I knew I was going to be inadequate. However, I had no idea the depth of the work God would do in me over the course of my first summer as a counselor. I think I expected to be different, but I did not expect to not recognize myself when I left camp. I was indeed a very different person when I left, and many of these women seem to have anticipated in their own lives the changes I experienced, and was surprised by, in mine.

Each participant was asked to evaluate herself before and after working at camp in the areas of patience, self-discipline, communication skills, empathy and compassion, decision-making skills, teamwork, ability to lead a devotional, self-confidence, humility and problem solving skills using a Likert scale. At least one participant reported improvement in each of the

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ten areas, with each participant indicating improvement in an average of five areas. Overall, the participants reported 107 points of total improvement on the summer, with each participant averaging six points across all areas. Self-discipline was the area most widely indicated by participants as an area of improvement, with 63% reporting some level of improvement, for a total increase of 14 points. Fifty-eight percent of participants said they felt they had grown in the areas of patience, self-confidence, communication skills, and the ability to lead a devotional. Roughly half of all participants noticed improvement in both decision making and problem solving skills, with 47% reporting a total of 11 points of improvement and 42% indicating they improved a total of nine points, respectively. Rounding out the list were the areas of humility, in which 37% of participants reported growth; teamwork, in which improvement was indicated by 21% of participants; and empathy and compassion, in which only 16% of participants said they improved.

Though only 37% of participants reported growth in the area of humility, it should be noted that the point total in that area was 13. This is essentially equal to the point totals in the categories occupying the top spots. When the total number of points is compared to the percent of participants the areas can be ranked in the following order regarding total amount of improvement: humility, patience, self-confidence, ability to lead a devotional, teamwork, decision making skills, communication skills, self-discipline, problem solving skills, and empathy and compassion. Overall, the greatest number of participants reported improvement in self-discipline, but the greatest amounts of improvement were overwhelming seen by participants in the area of humility, with patience and self-confidence coming in second. There was not a consistent correlation across all areas between the length of time the participant was employed at Camp War Eagle and the total amount of improvement seen by that participant.

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When asked to describe their experience at Camp War Eagle in three words, participants said their time as a CWE counselor was memorable, challenging, impacting, amazing, fun, reassuring, stressful, joyful, life-altering, hopeful, exciting, busy, encouraging, rewarding, encouraging, inspiring, exhausting, fulfilling, life-changing, and worthwhile. Participants also said Camp War Eagle was a place of growing and stretching, was a daily “heart-check” and was a huge blessing. By far the most frequent description was “challenging,” followed by “fun,” with “exhausting” coming in a close third.

Regarding the training they received during Counselor Orientation participants overwhelmingly pointed to the sessions on camper discipline and how to lead devotionals as the most helpful. Many said they greatly benefited from getting to play the games in Tribal Competition and actually getting to experience the schedule before campers arrived. Participants also praised the Staff Manual as an excellent resource and said living with the counselors with whom they would be working during the summer was very beneficial. Participants wished they had received more training in several areas, including dealing with difficult camper situations, motivating children without coercing them, having deeper conversations with children, and more age-group specific information. Overall participants said they felt very well prepared for most areas of camp.

Though well prepared, participants *were* emerged in a unique and challenging experience, and said they struggled most with always having energy, staying spiritually fueled, giving 100%, and being patient. Others said they thought dealing with homesick campers or loving on campers without receiving any love or respect in return was the hardest part of the summer for them. Many said they had difficulty depending on the Lord for strength, being joyful even when they weren’t happy, finding time for personal devotions, and being so far away from

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family for so long. A common theme in almost every participant's responses was the challenge of being forced out of her comfort zone on a moment by moment basis as new situations and difficulties arose.

Looking beyond the challenges they faced to their favorite part of the summer, participants overwhelmingly answered that developing relationships with campers and with other staff members was the highlight. Many also said they loved making campers smile and helping them have fun, as well as hearing them talk about Jesus and how they wanted to make Him a part of their lives at home. Several participants thought getting to play games in Tribal Competition and then going on to coach campers in those games was the best part of the summer, while others cited the program areas they worked in, such as the ropes course and the skate park. One participant in particular said the highlight of her summer was being placed in situations where she got to see that God had allowed things to happen in her life to deepen her testimony and give her an opportunity to share with a camper who was going through that same difficulty.

Participants were also asked to share a specific experience and how that experience led to growth in their own lives:

"I had a kid struggling with doubt that God really saved her when she asked and I've been through that. She asked me some really tough questions that made me seek answers in my own life."

"I had a girl in my cabin that lost her father last year. I lost my dad earlier this summer, so we were able to openly talk about how hard it was but how awesome it was to have a heavenly father who would never leave us and always love us. It really helped me because it's something I've been struggling with all summer and it showed me how God can even use something that bad for his glory."

"I got to be a coach for the oldest girls and I had two girls who were incredible athletes but put in zero effort. Figuring out how to coach them and encourage them was a challenge, but God taught me the power of prayer and constant love."

"I had a girl tell me she was really struggling with trusting that the Lord made her perfectly. By the end of the week she told me she couldn't wait to go home and not be



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ashamed, and let the Lord's beautiful light shine through her because she's worthy. This was a huge wakeup call for me."

Finally, participants were asked to summarize the biggest way in which they had changed during their time working as a counselor. Many participants said they had discovered who they were in Christ, had deepened their relationship with Him, and now knew what it was like to live from an eternal perspective. Some said they had matured as leaders and had a better idea about how to serve others while filling a leadership role. Several participants said they had seen how much of a difference they could make in others' lives and had a much clearer picture of the passions God had placed in their heart. One participant in particular said, "I think the person who came at the beginning of the summer was scared. She wanted to do great things but didn't know her worth was in Jesus. Now I feel confident and know the desires of my heart because God showed me what I can accomplish because of Him. He gave me strength, courage, peace, and joy I never knew." Another said, "I've learned what humility looks like. I've had to take myself off a pedestal, put the Lord on top, and realize that these kids are my equals. I've learned more from them than they've learned from me." These two statements capture the essence of my belief that working at camp radically changes the hearts of counselors, and the person they are at the end of the summer may be entirely different than the one who drove through the gates on the first day.

The common perception of camp is a place that children go to be taught and impacted by their counselors. In my experience I have found this to be true, but I have also discovered that God uses camp to profoundly impact its staff as well. The personal experiences of the participants are proof of that, and I have had similar experiences of my own. One night during my first year of camp, about three weeks in, I was lying in bed, almost asleep, when suddenly I had the most amazing thought. It was completely out of nowhere, but crystal clear: "These kids don't care who I am." I had just finished my first year of college where, for the first time in five

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years, I was not playing sports. In high school my identity was completely wrapped up in my image of myself as an athlete. I was stripped of that upon coming to college. When I came to camp I was still struggling to figure out who I was, and I was fighting feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. What I realized that night as I lay in a dark cabin listening to the soft breathing of twelve precious campers, was that they did not need me to be an athlete or have a perfect GPA. They did not care who or what I was, in the best possible way. All my campers needed from me was for me to love God and to love them. It was in that moment that God began reshaping my identity and redefining my self-worth.

As far as a *cost* of working at camp as a counselor, participants said they had to quickly learn to be patient and were forced to develop good habits of communication to survive. Their attitudes of selfishness, fear, and apathy were violently stripped away and they grew in confidence, selflessness, and enthusiasm. Participants also said relying on their own strength was not an option, and they were brought to a place where they had no choice but to rely on God. Many participants said they also learned to encourage well, be more intentional, forgive more quickly, extend grace more readily, and see people with the eyes of Christ. Most felt the changes made in their lives while at camp would continue to affect them long after they left CWE.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:**

Camp Confession #200 says, “You can leave camp, but camp never seems to leave you.” Truer words have never been spoken. From my personal experience, the research I did over the summer, and my personal relationships with first-time staff members at CWE, I can say without a doubt that summer camp is a radically life-changing place. The growth and experiences that happen there stay with a person long after they have left camp, and many people return for

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several summers. Every participant surveyed said that barring a call from God to pursue a different summer job they would definitely return to CWE because they enjoyed it so much and it had such a profound impact on their lives. Preparing to return for my fourth summer at CWE, I share their feelings. Working as a counselor was the hardest thing I have ever done, but the benefits I reaped were well worth the frustration, exhaustion, heartache, and tears that I suffered. I am eternally grateful for the experience of working at CWE.

After completing my research and speaking personally with many participants, I concluded that their experience during their first summer at CWE was very similar to mine. In short, it was life-altering. Participants were excited about working at CWE, as well as nervous, and also expected they would be different in some way at the end of the summer. They expected to be challenged and that the process of overcoming these challenges would create growth in their lives. At the end of the summer participants were extremely satisfied with their experience and reported that many admirable character traits had been further developed in their lives. Overall, the greatest joy participants found was in the deep friendships they developed with other staff, the experiences they had working with children, and the work God did in their lives throughout the summer.

If you're thinking about working at a summer camp for a whole summer, part of a summer, or maybe even full-time, do it. It may be one of the hardest things you've ever done. It may in fact cost you everything—fears, insecurities, selfishness, time, energy, sleep, immaturity, and negative attitudes. At the end of the summer you may not recognize the person you've become and you will probably be shocked to look back on your pre-camp self and see exactly how much you've changed. You may be asked to give up everything, but what you receive in return – the unconditional love of a child, the immense joy of being completely exhausted in

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service to a noble cause, unfathomably deep relationships with your fellow counselors, the sheer wonder at the power and majesty of the God we serve – is well worth what you will lose.

Working at camp is a life-changing experience that no words can ever accurately express. Your world will be turned upside down and you will never be the same.

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