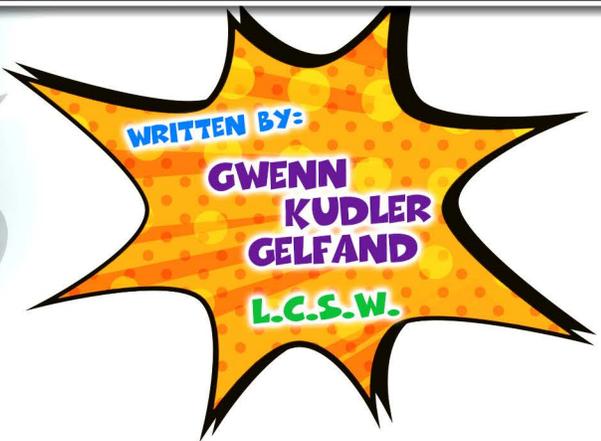




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WHERE ARE THE HEROES?



How is a hero defined? Is it by a black cape or the amount of money they have in the bank? Is it someone on a reality TV show, a rap star or the latest politicians in the news?

Throughout history young people have often looked to military figures and politicians as the inspiration for their values. These heroes, though calling us to lives of high ideals, were often remote and historical figures. In modern times our heroes have increasingly been replaced by more complex media figures. Movies, TV and music of old were less negative, less violent and less provocative than they are today. The messages sent were undoubtedly more positive. Today that no longer exists. Today, rap stars and wealthy people are glorified in the media. Negative behavior is accepted in sports, music and the movies. Violence and abuse are common with sports coaches and movie stars. Top recording artists in the music world are often associated with such behaviors as substance abuse, sexual abuse and gang violence. Religious figures are not immune from this.

In most of our lives the link between our distant heroes and our lived experience is filled by our personal heroes – our role models – the people we know day-to-day who exemplify our heroes’ values in our own time and place. These are the people who show us what Churchill’s or even Rocky’s determination can produce, who illustrate how the leadership of Lincoln or the hard work of the Olympic athlete can be translated into everyday life. These are the parents we see working hard to help us achieve or the teachers we observe patiently persevering in order to help us understand. And this is where camps come in.

At key points in our children’s lives, the heroes and role models of their early childhood (parents, family, friends, clergy, and teachers) begin to broaden out from those most immediate to them. In fact, every parent who has seen their early adolescent

roll their eyes at them and every teacher who has faced the unresponsiveness of students in class sees that their children are expanding their heroes and role models to new ones who can have even a more profound effect on them than they do. Who are these emerging heroes and role models? They might be sports coaches, after-school music teachers, and youth club directors. And, yes, they might even be camp counselors and staff.

With fewer positive heroes and role models for our children today, counselors at day camps, resident camps and specialty camps have an exciting and challenging opportunity to be positive role models, mentors and yes... heroes for kids today. The effects of a camper-counselor relationship are often minimized or underscored and the significant impact that can be made in a few intense weeks often goes unrecognized



or highlighted. When I was a camper at a well-known resident camp I learned much about boys, friendships, and many life lessons from one special counselor. To this day I think about the positive support and encouragement I received from her and the admiration I felt. She became a hero to me at a time where I was especially responsive to a young adult who was only a few years older.

What can camps do to encourage camp counselors and staff to become leading forces in campers' lives, playing the parts of heroes and positive role models who have a lifelong effect on their campers? Here are four things camps might consider.

1. Hire for Positive Role Models

Camp hiring processes can explicitly include interview questions designed to identify how aware applicants are of the importance of being a hero and positive role model. Ask applicants questions like:

- How do you show passion and try to inspire others?
- How have you attempted to overcome obstacles in your life?
- How do you demonstrate your values through your actions?
- How do you demonstrate selflessness and acceptance of others?
- How do you show your commitment to your community?

These kinds of questions can help identify applicants who are potential positive role models and the heroes to younger campers.

2. Train Counselors and Staff to Be Heroes and Positive Role Models

Staff training should encourage counselors to recognize that their behaviors are modeled in the eyes of

their campers. They have increasing opportunities to play a role for today's youth with their words, actions and even appearance. Part of this can involve sensitizing counselors and staff to be on the watch for the potential for positive role modeling and the need to steer campers away from negative models. One way this plays out is in terms of being aware of bullying among campers and how to deal with it. But part of the training should also address key skills. For instance, research on role models shows that it is important to help campers understand the dangers of a "winning at all costs" attitude versus the positive value of enhancing their internal strengths by trying hard regardless of results. One of the big concerns especially for young teens is that they sometimes begin to follow negative role models. And, counselors and staff need to be taught not to become negative role models themselves. They need to be aware of how their negative behavior is also a model for campers. This is tricky. Counselors and staff may not always realize that they are constantly being observed and mimicked by highly impressionable young campers. Doing role plays or acting out everyday camp scenes showing how even well-intentioned counselors or staff can project negative values and behaviors can be an essential part of their training.

3. Show Counselors and Staff How They Benefit from Being Heroes and Positive Role Models

Being a hero or positive role model doesn't just help the young people who emulate them. These are values and skills that turn the camp counselors and staff of today into the leaders, heroes

and role models of adulthood. They may not realize that when they model good behavior to young people they are actually helping themselves by building good habits that will carry on into their family and work lives.

4. Enhance Camp Programming to Emphasize Heroes and Positive Role Modeling

Consider camp programming that explicitly emphasizes heroes, positive role models, and the values they represent. For instance, programs that engage campers in giving back something to the community the camp is in are opportunities for both staff and campers to model good behavior.

I was nine years old at a resident camp when I learned that my grandfather had died. I felt alone and confused. I wasn't with my family, especially my parents. I really had no idea how to process the conflicting and profound feelings I had. Then my camp counselor stepped in. She was someone I already knew, admired and trusted. She stayed with me. She comforted me. She shared that she had been through this before and I could see that she came through it fine. At that time, she was my hero.

In our social media era we are in danger of losing the important function that heroes and role models play. Camps can be one of the most effective places to show young people what heroism means in the everyday life of their role models and how they can become the heroes and role models of the next generation.

