

How Camp Ocoee Changes Lives

Interesting to hear young people talk about their Camp Ocoee experience in the first few years and see the transformation taking place in how they see themselves, their world and their God, especially after many years at camp.

Gracie Hollis, 7 years old from Spring Hill, TN, came to camp missing her two front teeth.



“This is my first year at Camp Ocoee and so far it’s been awesome! There’s lots of nice people and fun games like dodge ball. The best thing is swimming and doing cannonballs off the dock. I didn’t know we would get to camp in a tent for one night, so that will be fun.

This is the first time away from my parents for a whole week. I sent them a note that said ‘I love you and miss you. Come and see us. Camp is so much fun!’

I have made a lot of friends like my whole cabin and the counselors and when we went fishing I made friends with the fish! I caught one and named it Slimey because we got to touch him and that’s what it felt like. I’ve been fishing ten times in my life and this is the first time I ever caught one. I’m never going to forget this day.”

For a ten-year-old boy, **Sayre Stratigos** has a pretty unique way of describing his second year at Camp Ocoee.

“I came back because it’s a nice way to spend time with 30 friends from last year. Camp Ocoee is a peaceful place where you can feel independent and try new things. When you do, and they are fun, it makes you want to try other things. I want to thank the people who bought us the new water toys and for making the camp a better place.”



“My mom used to come when she was a kid, as a camper and then a counselor. She said she really liked it, that it was a fun place and a good place to learn. I think it is too,” says **Isaac Hunter**, 9 years old from Knoxville and enjoying his third year at Camp Ocoee.



“From the minute I got here I knew this was going to be the best week of my whole summer. I wish I could stay three weeks. It’s a cool place where there is lots to do. It’s a good place to be close to God. I feel God is here.”

“I like spending the night in bunk beds in the cabin because you feel like you are outside when you can hear the crickets and the cicadas, which you can’t hear at home.”

“The water toys are really fun, like the new rocket and the water trampoline. I want to try paint ball and the

V-swing when I’m ten. I’m coming back next year.”

Sophia Hernandez from Atlanta is also nine years old and attending summer camp for the third time. It all started when her family came to Family Camp on Memorial Weekend before her first year as a summer camper, and they have been back every year.



“We wanted to see what it would be like before I came by myself in the summer,” Sophia says. “Family camp is nice because we get time to ourselves with our parents -- my brother and me, just the four of us.”

“In the summer I like when we have the devotion because it’s like church, but out in nature. Here we believe in ‘I am third: God then Others then Me’. It’s true here. We have a good time talking about God in the cabin and some of the girls didn’t really believe at the beginning. They are changed and are more into God and praying with us.”

“Next year I’m coming for two weeks because when I’m ten I can do rafting, stand-up paddle boards and V-swing. I’ll probably be coming as a counselor someday.”



Keaton Warren is eleven years old and came to his third year at camp from Chattanooga with high expectations....until he broke his arm.

“This year I was going to do the V-swing for the first time, plus archery and rock climbing,” he sighs and then explains how it happened.

“I’m on the top bunk in our cabin and I fell off and landed on my arm. I didn’t want to be on the

bottom bunk because last year the kid above me was a bed-wetter and I got wet.”

“It was the middle of the night and my arm hurt really bad,” Keaton says. “The counselor in my cabin said he thought he was dreaming when he woke and said ‘Who’s screaming?’ So we went to the camp infirmary and they gave me some medicine and the next morning we went to the hospital to get Xrays. Both bones were broken.”

Keaton’s father took him to the children’s hospital in Chattanooga expecting to take him home after the arm was wrapped in a cast. But Keaton had other ideas.

“I wanted to come back to camp. I knew it would still be fun. I’ve never done Arts & Crafts in the past and now that I’ve tried it, it’s really fun and they do a lot of stuff. I made a bracelet called a Chinese Staircase. My favorite thing is making new friends, like with a kid from as far away as France who doesn’t even speak English, and running around screaming during the games. Even if you get hurt, you can make the best of it.”

The Wheeler family, from Atlanta, has been coming to Family Camp for Clare’s entire life. Now she’s 15 and in her tenth year at summer camp.

“I’ve been running around Camp Ocoee since I was a baby,” **Claire Wheeler** says. “I know my way around the entire camp and I try to help the little kids when they get lost. I’m super comfortable here and a big Camp Ocoee fan. I feel at home in myself like I can show my true personality. No one is judging you. Everyone accepts you. It’s a great experience.”



“Camp Ocoee played a role in my interest in travel and adventure programs. I’d love to do a camp where you learn survival skills! I appreciate nature and hate to think I’d be like other teenagers, attached to my phone. Before I left I told my friends I would be

gone for three weeks and left my phone on my bed. They couldn't believe I was going to spend three weeks without electronics, but it's not hard for me at all."

"I have a strong emotional bond with Camp and I can't imagine my life without it. Next year I'm going to be a Counselor-in-Training. My goal is to go every summer so I can be a counselor then a staff person, then a lead staff person and work in the main office."



John Ordway is now an Ambassador or volunteer counselor. Seventeen years old, from Huntsville and he's been coming to Camp Ocoee for eight years, first as a camper, then a Counselor-in-Training and next year he will be a counselor.

"This place means a lot to me. I came for the first time when I was nine. I met great people and have good memories. I want to supply that same experience to other kids. I love this place and want it to continue to grow."

"I'm a spiritual person and feel Him all around me. In the trees, in the beautiful lake, and I feel like He put Camp Ocoee in my life for a reason," John says. "During my last year as a camper in Park cabin we had a kid in our group who had Down Syndrome. We loved him. On one of the last nights during small group worship he started crying because he was going to miss us. We had a big group hug and it was the most touching moment I've ever seen. Everybody was in tears. It made me realize if a camper could touch someone's life like that, imagine what we could do as counselors. I was inspired. It was the best night ever."

"This year one of the kids led a few devotions really well and we saw him go from a quiet kid to a devotion leader. It's awesome to see kids change and come out of their shell at camp. I remember what's it's like the first few years. I didn't want to come. My parents made me. My mom had been to camp as a kid and she said 'You are going to love it.' After that first year, I was hooked. I want my kids to come. You have no idea how excited I am about that happening some day."

"I want people to know that sending a kid to Camp Ocoee will change their lives in a good way, forever."