

Camp builds leadership

By Randy Ray

Parents hoping summer camp will instil leadership skills in their children should have a chat with Caitlin Cashubec.

For two summers, Cashubec, now a second-year university student, attended a camp in the Ottawa Valley and last summer was a camp counsellor and lifeguard at the same camp.

The experience taught her how to handle responsibility, be more punctual and organized, and showed her the importance of teamwork.

“I’m definitely a better person for it,” says Cashubec, who is studying health sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines. “The organizational skills have stuck with me and so has the timing thing. Getting up early every morning at camp was helpful because I have early classes at university.

“As a counsellor, you see a lot of different things happen and you work with some kids who are not as fortunate as others. Helping them changes your perspective on things. At the end of the day I’m a better person.”

Cashubec’s insights are music to the ears of camp operators who feel their facilities are the perfect place for children and teens to develop the leadership skills that equip them to better negotiate the sometimes-rocky road of life.

Most have counsellors that lead by example; some camps have formal leadership programs. Many offer a variety of activities that enable kids to pick up leadership skills by trying out various experiences, or simply observing as others lead the way.

For parents who sink several hundred dollars into a summer camp experience, it can be a boon. Not only will their kids come home smiling and chock full of memories, they’ll also have learned how to be shepherds rather than sheep.

Cashubec picked up her leadership skills at Frontier Trails Camp near Eganville, where owner Dave Tubby says passing these qualities on to campers and teaching older kids to be counsellors is high on his 33-year-old camp’s to-do list. Frontier Trails has a leadership training program.

Leadership training, says Tubby, often starts when children are campers and can begin with the simplest of activities, such as wearing a life jacket before heading onto the lake for a canoe ride.

“Leadership is all about choices ... a good leader is presented with many different choices and must make a good choice that will make others want to follow along. Many people say leaders are born; I say they are made.”

An example of early leadership, he adds, is a child who, before getting into a canoe, and without direction from anyone, puts on a life jacket and asks fellow campers to also don life jackets.

“That child has showed leadership and we say to him “good job, way to go,” says Tubby. “This is an example of a building block we will work with ... that child is operating based on something inside versus outside control. He is deciding to do something that is good for himself and his friends.”

Another example of early leadership is the child who helps fellow campers ascend a climbing wall or take part in a sport such as archery.

“Once that child has tried it out and decided it is not intimidating and gone further than he or she thought they would, all of sudden they’re on ground they know and they can give back to other campers and encourage them ... now it is they who are showing leadership.”

Some children pick up leadership skills that show up at home and at school. Kids who were once passive leave camp as leaders and instigators. About five per cent of Frontier’s 450 campers eventually join the camp’s leadership program. “They go from being served to doing the serving,” says Tubby.

At Frontier, children 14 and up can enrol in a four-week leadership camp that has them performing a variety of tasks in conjunction with camp staff while the camp is up and running. Kids 16 and older can become counsellors in training, a paid position that sees them running various programs such as horseback riding and canoeing and coaching teams.

The benefits of developing leadership skills are numerous.

It is expertise that strengthens a resume because most employers recognize the challenge teens face in shepherding groups of children through the summer months. Employers also find that counsellors are reliable, punctual, polite, and accountable, says Tubby.

Leadership is also valuable when attending high school and university. Young people who work as counsellors learn to know what their bosses expect from them and when they return to school they can read their teachers and professors better and knowing their expectations, they often perform better academically.

“Leadership, I believe, is a characteristic you take into marriage, work and school and we are trying to build it into the kids,” says Tubby. “Some come with it and all we have to do is help them polish it; others need to re-think life and have to take another kick at the can when it comes to leadership.”

Cashubec, who this summer may return to Frontier Trails for a second year of counselling, feels the leadership and people skills she has picked up will be valuable should she land in her career of choice, the chiropractic field.

“As a counsellor you are not always with a boss, so you learn to do a lot of things on your own and you have to improvise. You also take care of large groups of children. All of these skills will help with my career, which will involve all kinds of contact with people.”

This article originally appeared in the March 2009 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.