Camp Heartland, a Longtime Retreat for Youth With HIV, Is Closing

The Minnesota camping facility is for sale. The good news is, the number of children born with HIV has plummeted since Heartland opened 31 years ago.

November 1, 2024 By Trent Straube

Since 1993, Camp Heartland has offered a much-needed respite and joy toyouth living with and affected by HIV. But the beloved Minnesota camp is closing because the facility is for sale. It has served over 6,000 youth affected by HIV and AIDS during its three-decade run.

Posted by One Heartland on Wednesday, October 30, 2024

“My Dear One Heartland Friends, I have a range of emotions today as I have bittersweet news to share,” announced camp founder Neil Willenson in an October 29 Facebook post. “I was informed recently that the Board of Directors of One Heartland has made the very hard decision to place the beautiful One Heartland Center up for sale. The ‘sweet’ is that mother-to child-transmission of HIV has virtually been eliminated in the United States in recent years. The number of children now born with HIV is in the handfuls versus the estimated 1,630 babies born with HIV during our founding year in 1993. One never could [have] imagined this incredible progress in three decades”

Located in Willow River, Minnesota, about 90 minutes from the Twin Cities, the One Heartland facilities include cabins, lakes, a health center, swimming pool and more spread across 93 acres.

One Heartland has operated several camps targeted to different youth populations. For example, Camp Heartland served youth living with and affected by HIV, while Camp True Colors was open to LGBTQ and gender-expansive youth. One Heartland has offered camping experiences for young people facing other serious health issues, such as diabetes, as well as for unhoused youth and children facing other hardships.

In his Facebook announcement, Willenson continued:

> “When we were founded 31 years ago, we had the goal of providing children affected by HIV/AIDS with a one-time, weeklong experience of unconditional love and acceptance. Through the tireless and unwavering support of tens of thousands of donors, camp volunteers, staff, board members and more—the program lasted 30 more years than my original intention. Along with moments of great joy and inspiration, there have been painful and profound losses of at least 150 prior campers. We cherish the time we had with them and remember them always.
>
> “I do celebrate today that through medical progress there is almost no demand for our Camp Heartland camps.
>
> “But it is also ‘bitter’ news in that One Heartland was still serving a number of children and teenagers who experienced adversity and hardship. With this sadness in mind, the organization hopes to use the proceeds from the sale of the camp to continue to make an impact in some capacity in the future.
>
> “Years ago, we experienced the complete loss of our Malibu camp due to the wildfires. That was a sad time for all, yet our memories are still preserved. I believe the same to be true with a pending sale of the One Heartland Center. While the facility played a massive role in the impact that we made, as it was a safe second home for thousands of children, the real impact was made on a human level. I always said, “We could have camp in a parking lot.” While a nice facility is very beneficial, the beauty of camp programming comes down to the connections made between human beings. And in our case, human beings who had the shared bond of HIV/AIDS, grief, and many other challenges. Our vibrant community has provided a place of unconditional love and acceptance for well more than 10,000 youth over the years.
>
> “Our facility and programs have been so important to children and volunteers that a few of our participants have their resting place in our Honor Garden. It is my strongest hope and prayer that the Honor Garden will be preserved by whomever purchases the property. The organization has initial inquiries from some other child-serving organizations, and I look forward to seeing how the camp can help another generation of young people and families in the years to come.”

Willenson spoke with MPRNews.org about One Heartland center, its HIV origins and more; you can listen to the conversation or read the transcript here.

Willenson says he’s “in such awe” of the resilience of the young campers, who number more than 6,000 youth. “These were young people that not only were living with HIV or had a loved one with it, many of them were grieving. Many of them had lost a parent or two parents to the disease. Many were living in poverty. Some of them had parents who were incarcerated.

“Through medicine, through the support of their community and the camp community, and through their own inner strength, [the campers] did endure, and they’re living good lives. And so that’s what gets me through the sad times over the years. But I just learned a lot about resilience and the power of hope.

“Literally every week, I hear from a former camper, and I’m just full of such joy to see that these young people, who we thought would die—that was the prognosis— that these young people are married, and they’re productive. One of them, my friend, Ray, is a leading social worker. He has an MSW, an LSW. Some are nurses. Some are doctors. Some are business leaders. It’s incredible. So I just live vicariously through the accomplishments of these kids. I’m just so full of joy for what’s been accomplished.”

For related articles, see “Help Young People Stop HIV Stigma,” a 2020 opinion piece by One Heartland about the threat COVID-19 posed to the camp, and “Young at Heartland,” a 2002 10th anniversary profile on Camp Heartland. More recently, there’s “Red Ribbon Ride Wraps Up Amid HIV Outbreak in Twin Cities,” about an AIDS bike ride through Minnesota that raises funds for several HIV service providers in the state, including One Heartland, and “California Wildfires Destroy Camp for Teens Living with HIV.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/camp-heartland-longtime-retreat-youth-hiv-closing