Help Young People Stop HIV Stigma

COVID-19 threatens the survival of a summer camp created in response to AIDS.

June 12, 2020 By One Heartland

Camp is magical! It is a home away from home. It is a place where marginalized young people can feel safe. A place for youth impacted by HIV/AIDS, for children experiencing homelessness and for LGBTQ+ young people. And it is facing the very real possibility of closing its doors forever.

One Heartland was born as a response to the AIDS epidemic in 1993. At the time, Neil Willenson, a college student in Wisconsin, learned of a young boy who was not allowed to go to summer camp because he had AIDS. Neil, along with a few friends, saw the injustice in this and wanted to do something about it.

Their solution? Camp Heartland. A week of camp that was to be the “best week ever” for children who were impacted by HIV/AIDS. A week where they just got to be kids, where they felt safe and accepted, and all of their medical needs were taken care of.

That summer, 78 children were given a week full of hope. Neil and friends were proud of their accomplishment and continued on with their lives. But the families they had served had different plans. They reached back out to Neil and asked when camp would be the next summer. Something amazing had been created and the community it started did not want to let it go.

Decades later, Camp Heartland, now named One Heartland, is still here, and serving more young people than ever before. But we don’t know for how long.

COVID-19 has impacted the world in many ways. It has forced us to shutter our programs for summer 2020 because it’s not safe to gather. It has also impacted the groups that normally would rent our camp facility, causing us to lose much-needed income. Foundations who typically support us have had to direct their funds elsewhere to directly respond to the new pandemic.

One Heartland has had to make many sacrifices to help lower our budget, including closing our Minneapolis office and laying off several of our staff.

But we know our work is not done. There are still so many young people who need camp, especially now after experiencing life in a new pandemic. They need to know they are not alone, that they still have a community that understands them and still cares about them. So we continue to fight to be here for summer 2021.

We have had our share of challenges over the years. The H1N1 epidemic forced us to cancel camp. Flooding near our facility cancelled camp twice. And our site in Malibu, California, burned to the ground two years ago. But we are still here and still fighting for the kids who need camp most almost three decades after we started. We will fight to be here for decades more.

“What makes One Heartland’s camps different is how they make our young people feel,” said Patrick Kindler, our executive director. “Our staff members are for the most part either former campers or young people who come from the populations we serve.”

One such camper turned staff member is Dallas Turner. Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she started attending Camp Heartland at the age of 11. “I arrived at a wonderful place where smiles and warmth are all you see,” she said of her first camp experience.

Many years and campfires later, Dallas gives back to One Heartland and is a role model for today’s campers by serving on staff. “Camp is an amazing experience,” she said. “It’s family, it’s love and it’s laughter. It’s a support system that I will always cherish and love.”

Once you come to camp, you are part of the camp community for life. And this new pandemic has shown us how true that is.

Many people who have experienced camp — as a camper, a volunteer, a staff, an educator, a supporter — have been working hard to raise funds and awareness to save One Heartland. They have also shared memories and shown us that the memories from camp never fade. In fact, many of those memories and friendships made at camp are helping people get through this pandemic.

You can help save One Heartland and make sure camp is here for the kids who need it most. Please go to OneHeartland.org to make a donation.

For more information Please contact One Heartland executive director Patrick Kindler by email at patrick@oneheartland.org or by phone at 651-245-7448 for more information.

Watch this video testimonial:

Click here for POZ coverage of One Heartland.

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