Serving Youth

In an opinion piece titled "Help Young People Stop HIV Stigma," the nonprofit organization One Heartland shares how COVID-19 threatens the survival of the summer camp it created in response to AIDS. Below is an edited excerpt.

August 17, 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 having to close its doors forever.

One Heartland was born in 1993 as a response to the AIDS epidemic. 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 impacted by HIV/AIDS. A week where they just got to be kids, where they felt safe and accepted and all their medical needs were met.

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 kick off next summer. Something amazing had been created, and the community 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 close 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 that typically support us have had to shift 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.

“What makes One Heartland’s camps different is how they make our young people feel,” says 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, she started attending Camp Heartland at age 11. “I arrived at a wonderful place where smiles and warmth are all you see,” she says of her first camp experience.

Many 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 says. “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’re part of the 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 staffer, 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.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/serving-youth-one-heartland