Summer Camp for All

For 25 years, One Heartland brings support to the rustic woods of Minnesota and beyond.

April 1, 2018 By Mark S. King

Neil Willenson never meant to start a camp in his home state of Wisconsin, much less an organization that has served thousands of kids facing formidable life challenges. Willenson was just moved by a story about a boy and his struggles that he read in the paper in 1993.

The boy was 7-year-old Nile Sandeen, also from Wisconsin, who had stirred the media simply by trying to be admitted into kindergarten. Nile had been born with HIV and, especially in the Midwest of the 1990s, ignorance about the virus and social stigma toward children like Sandeen was commonplace. Willenson reached out to Sandeen and his family, and they began what would become a lifelong friendship.

Willenson learned early on that Nile wanted to go to summer camp, just like his friends. However, Willenson realized that, if attending kindergarten had been such a confrontational experience for Sandeen, finding a summer camp would prove nearly impossible. So with help from some industrious friends, he created a summer camp for Sandeen and other children like him. Camp Heartland was born.

It was the summer of 1993, and more than 70 kids attended. Willenson figured the camp would be a one-off. But then the phone started ringing. Parents from around the country wanted to know how to register for the next camp.

For the next several years, Camp Heartland was held at various rented campsites throughout the Midwest. Then in 1996, Camp Heartland purchased a permanent site in Willow River, Minnesota. This year, the group marks 25 years of providing a safe and loving space for children to be themselves, without the threat of stigma or the burden of the many challenges of their everyday lives.

Patrick Kindler was immediately drawn to Camp Heartland's unique mission. He became its executive director in 2011 after serving on staff for several years. "I didn't know about the organization until I saw the job posting," Kindler says, "and then I read a book about the camp and the experiences of the children called The Journey of Hope. As soon as I read that book and the stories of the kids, I wanted the job immediately."

Fortunately for Kindler, explaining Camp Heartland's simple mission is a fairly easy sell, despite

the constant challenge of fundraising. “Everyone is interested because we are talking about kids here,” Kindler says. “Our donor base runs the gamut, from billionaires to people who don’t make a lot of money but save their pennies so they can donate. We have students who send in two dollars or five dollars.”

The organization takes every dollar to heart. “We focus on people who are isolated or living at the poverty level,” Kindler explains. It’s not hard to imagine what a life-changing experience two weeks away in a nurturing, rustic environment might be for the children who attend.

During its 25 years, the camp has changed in ways that reflect epidemiological, medical and even political shifts in the HIV landscape.

For example, Camp Heartland originally focused on very young children, says Kindler, and then, as mother-to-child HIV transmissions plummeted as a result of treatment advances, the camp raised the upper age limit for eligible kids. The need for a space for the very young dropped while the kids they were serving were aging out of the program. “As our kids got older,” said Kindler, “we expanded the ages to 16- to 21-year-olds.”

In recognition of the changing nature of the epidemic, Camp Heartland officially changed its name in 2006 to One Heartland. The change reflected the addition of year-round support programs for campers as well as partnerships with outside groups to conduct programs.

In 2010, a political change meant an entirely new client base for the camp. For years, the HIV travel ban had prevented the adoption of children with HIV from other countries. But President Obama’s lifting of the travel ban in 2010 resulted in a surge of adoptions of HIV-positive children from Eastern European countries. The camp felt the impact of the influx of these young immigrants and welcomed them with open arms.

The camp also recognized that there were other community needs that it could address. “We partnered with other charities in our community,” said Kindler, “and that’s when we started designing camps for youth who were experiencing homelessness, or had other health issues, or who were coming to terms with their sexuality.” This kind of expansion made sense, according to Kindler, because “all of our programs are about celebrating young people and giving them the space where they can be themselves.”

Today, One Heartland operates six different camps that focus on specific populations, including Camp Northstar for kids living in transitional housing, Camp 5210 for kids who want to achieve a healthy lifestyle, Camp True Colors for kids who identify as LGBTQ, OneFutures for kids preparing to live independently and a satellite camp in Malibu, California, called Camp Hollywood HEART that helps kids affected by HIV/AIDS through the arts.

“Expanding our mission, working with other populations, has helped us work better with our HIV population as well. A lot of HIV funding has moved or gone away, but we still have campers every year who want to come back. If we had not diversified, we would have shut our doors years ago,” Kindler explains.

The original camp continues to operate for children living with or affected by HIV, and it remains a powerful experience for campers and staffers alike. “Some of our kids are positive, and some are not but their parents are,” says Kindler.

“They struggle with things that they cannot talk about in their community. Some of them don’t want to talk to their parents about it. They worry about their parents’ health or worry about them taking their medication. They don’t want them to get sick,” says Kindler. “At camp, they have a support network if they want to talk about things. They have that outlet. They develop a social network they will have the rest of their lives. They remain friends forever. That’s what any summer camp does, but we’re special because we do this for a specific group of people.”

“A lot of people ask who our competition is, and there is none,” Kindler adds. “We were born out of the AIDS epidemic, and we’re proud of that, but really our program model can be used for anyone who is isolated.”

For more information, go to OneHeartland.org.

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