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Participants in this year's Opportunity Camp play a baseball game in the open spaces of East Texas Baptist Encampment, where they find open arms and open hearts as well.

Opportunity knocks at this camp for Texas' hard-knocks teenagers

By George Henson

Staff Writer

NEWTON-With boys everywhere, at first glance this could be a Royal Ambassador camp. Boys are playing basketball, talking to counselors, wondering how much longer until dinner.

There's a difference not obvious on the surface, however. More than half these boys have had run-ins with the police and are on juvenile probation. More than 80 percent of them have no previous association with church. All of them need to see a Christ-like example.

For almost 40 years, churches of Golden Triangle Baptist Association have provided a means for troubled adolescents to learn about Jesus, many for the first time.

The program is called Opportunity Camp, and it is offered in separate sessions for boys and girls.

Dion Ainsworth, associate director of missions for the association, has provided leadership for the camp for 23 years. During that time, he said, he's seen almost everything from fist fights to a youth going berserk and threatening others with a pitchfork. But he's also seen many lives changed for eternity.

Ainsworth recalled a school counselor who had referred a boy to Opportunity Camp.

"We had a guidance counselor tell us that when school started up after the summer, that boy looked her up. He told her, 'I found Christ, and my whole life has changed.'

"She told me, 'You just have them for that one week, but we get to see the difference you make.' She had tears in her eyes when she told me that boy was killed in a car accident last December, but he will spend eternity in heaven now because of Opportunity Camp," Ainsworth said.

First priority in enrollment for the camp goes to youth on juvenile probation in Jefferson and Orange counties. Last year, more than 75 percent of the youth who attended were on probation.

If space still is available, registration opens to adolescents referred by Child Protective Services and school counselors.

A few years ago, Ainsworth had to have a heart-to-heart talk with some of the juvenile probation officers—they weren't sending him kids with serious problems anymore.

“I had to tell them: 'If you're not sending us kids who have lots of problems, there's no reason for us to have Opportunity Camp. They could go to a regular church camp and just have a church scholarship them,'” he recalled.

Opportunity Camp is different than a regular church camp.

“This is for kids who are at high risk, kids who wouldn't make it through a regular camp,” he explained. “They would be sent home the first day for fighting or for some other thing.”

At Opportunity Camp, one counselor is assigned to every four campers, and the small groups always stay together. The added supervision makes it less likely something bad will happen.

“They also like getting a lot of attention,” Ainsworth said. “They may not act like it, but most of them like it.”

That means dorms built to hold 20 or 30 people have only four or five occupants, which creates higher operating expenses for East Texas Baptist Encampment, where Opportunity Camp is held.

“It's hard for them to break even on Opportunity Camp,” Ainsworth admitted. “They have to see it as a ministry.”

Campers also don't pay anything to attend because churches in the association pick up the tab. That includes transportation, T-shirts, Bibles and a nurse, among other things.

“Some of kids just show up with the clothes on their back, but we take care of them. We just make a trip to Wal-Mart,” he said.

The camp is highly structured and includes little free time. Campers are supervised at all times. Spiritual themes are interwoven with fun activities. On the rifle range, for example, campers are taught not only about safety but also about how sin is missing the mark of God's plan for their lives.

Small-group times also include communicating with God, weightlifting, how to be secure and numerous other topics.

The days are long—sometimes not ending until midnight or after. “We know they're not going to sleep until about 1 a.m. anyway, so we use that energy,” Ainsworth said.

Opportunity Camp is segregated, with boys there Monday through Wednesday afternoon and girls arriving Wednesday evening and leaving Saturday morning.

Twenty-five campers made professions of faith in Jesus Christ at this year's camp, and 10 more made rededications.

That is what brings back most of the counselors year after year.

“This is one of the hardest camps to be a counselor in,” Ainsworth admitted. “In church camp, they have at least seen the kids they are with before. Here, they don't know any of the kids until they get on the bus. ... It's tough, but the rewards are great.”

Lionel Vandergriff, 64, has been a counselor four years.

“The first year was probably the hardest,” he admitted. “It was a new experience, and I didn't know what to expect. I was the only counselor who lost all his boys five minutes after they got off the bus; they scattered like a covey of quail. But I struggled to remember their names and got them all

back. I really struggled with coming back the next year.”

But he was drawn back by the memory of what happened at the end of the camp.

“Those boys shared about their home life, and when we got back to that church parking lot, they went back to that same home life,” he said. “I was there being met by my wife and grandchildren. I just thought, 'I'm so blessed, how can I not go back and try to give back?'"

Sherry Thompson, director of this year's girls' camp, has been involved for 18 years.

“At church, you see God's working in kids' lives gradually, but I'd never seen a dramatic change of girls getting on a bus cussing each other, spitting and trying to fight, and then accepting Jesus Christ and being totally different,” she said.

“You can see Jesus at work at Opportunity Camp, and it has increased my faith because I have seen miracles, real miracles. I've seen girls come in spitting and snarling and going out as gentle as lambs.”

She admits Opportunity Camp is not for the faint-hearted.

“The girls we deal with have a real hard shell around their hearts, and it's for protection,” she explained. “You have to love them through that hard shell to get to the soft part.”

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