

Camp Fusion cultivates culture of connection, service

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While many teenagers struggle to fit in and find their place in the world, adolescent immigrants or refugees face particular challenges.

Each summer, hundreds of those teens make their way to Latham Springs Camp & Retreat Center in Aquilla not only to have fun and fellowship at Camp Fusion, but also to address those issues.

“What makes Camp Fusion different is the cultures that are present,” said Lauren De La Calzada, who began attending Camp Fusion in 2012, soon after she finished the 6th grade. Since 2018, she has worked at the camp’s recreation team.

“This camp is specifically created for these youth who are coming from first- and second-generation families who have a very specific childhood where they bridge the gap between parents’ ways, adjusting to American culture and discovering what God has to say about my culture.”

Laruen’s sister-in-law Rachel has attended Camp Fusion since 2010 and started serving in 2015.

“I did a couple of years as a counselor and moved on to rec team,” Rachel said. “I think it is something so beautiful. These kids have come from church backgrounds where it is primarily their own cultures. I think it’s important to share these cultures.”

A day at Camp Fusion

In its 15th year, Camp Fusion, a Texas Baptists camp, gives Asian, African, Haitian and Brazilian teenagers from 6th through 12th grade a chance to embrace their unique cultural experience and the truth about what God has to say about them. The teens who share similar challenges can connect with others just like them.

The days are filled with devotionals, evening worship, three meals a day, and the true camp experience of swimming in the lake, playing sports and participating in competitions.



Teens spending time together near the snack shop at Camp Fusion. (Photo / Kendall Lyons)

Evening worship this year featured “The Agape Youth Band,” a group of seven young people who are part of the music and youth ministry at Agape Community Fellowship Church in Fort Worth.

Voltaire Cacal, a Filipino-American pastor and dean of international students and senior director of formal language programs at Dallas Theological Seminary, spoke each evening.

Preaching from Ephesians 2:11-22, Cacal reminded the teens: “You are not a stranger to God. You are family.”

“The gospel does not flatten your culture. It redeems it. In Christ, your background becomes a bridge, not a barrier,” Cacal said.

Danny Aguinaldo, assistant director, attended Camp Fusion in 2010, and committed his life to Christ there two years later. He took on a leadership role in 2014 with the rec team and later was promoted to his current post.

“Going to Camp Fusion created this community where I got to be around more Asians and Africans and it really helped me in my walk and in figuring out who I am and what I label myself with. In 2012, I came to Christ at Camp Fusion. I was 19,” Aguinaldo said.

From a vision to a mission

Since 2008, Mark Heavener has served in the office of Intercultural Ministries at Texas Baptists. His work involves connecting with churches with roots from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, covering 80 different language groups and more than 350 congregations among Texas Baptists.

“I worked under the founder of the office, Patty Lane. We knew each other beforehand while I completed my seminary degree in cross-cultural ministries. I had a focus and a heart for intercultural America during seminary,” Heavener said.

In 2003, intercultural pastors requested something for the youth in their churches.

“Before that, two different camps ... Asian camp and African youth camp ... were rolled out from that need in 2003. So, the two camps were developed. In 2009, I worked to see if we can bring the two camps together. And after doing a few events ... in 2010, we moved towards fusing the two camps together, hence the name Camp Fusion,” Heavener said.

Training the next generation

“This camp is not for camp’s sake. One of the larger needs among intercultural churches is leadership development for the second gen, the ones born here—needing a space and place to grow in spiritual formation as well as leadership gifts.”

Heavener and his team work with a variety of campers who deal with a generational gap within their home and life and ongoing tension between their cultural identity and American life.

“There is a generational gap between those who came as immigrants, the first gen and those born here, and then the intersection with American culture. Then there’s a convergence of all that, and in the middle is the chaos that these kids are living in bicultural lives,” Heavener said.

Camp Fusion offers Asian and African teens an opportunity to learn how to embrace their identity and find out Jesus welcomes them. Throughout the camp experience, kids see leaders who look like them, striving to serve the Lord and one another.

Training starts with teens who are interested in leading workshops and groups, followed by the development of other kids who are interested in following their footsteps.

The goal is to create the next generation of church leaders

“In the broader American culture, they are pushed to the fringes because of being immigrants or refugees or just different. And identity is always a big issue, predominant issue,” Heavener added.

“So, spiritual formation with a leadership development component is then funneled into the development of the camp. Every year, the cycle repeats.”

When the teens return to their homes and their churches, parents and pastors take notice. The kids appear more confident, get involved in their church, and share their Camp Fusion experience.

Testimony from teens

Lily, who's on her way to 11th grade at the end of summer, chose to spend a few days at Camp Fusion. The time she has spent with other teens in workshops covering topics like dating has impacted her.

"In the workshop I was in, 'dating isn't that deep,' I learned that if you jump into dating without knowing yourself, then you leave others to define who you are," Lily said.

Nathan just graduated from high school and started his third year in camp. This was his first year serving in leadership.

"It is a different point of view. I love to see all the kids happy and energetic," Nathan said. "Throughout training and preparing for my volunteering, it brought me closer to God ... the opportunity to pray and ask God what his plan is for me."

The diversity of Camp Fusion

Linda Howell, intercultural specialist for Texas Baptists, works with Heavener to make sure Camp Fusion maintains strong representation from the many intercultural churches within the BGCT.

"We have a very diverse population. This (Camp Fusion) is the place where they get to be themselves," Howell said. "They talk through deep issues within the church and what they are going through and get to meet new kids who have similar struggles."

This year, 525 people attended, with teens from 35 churches representing 17 cultures.

Camp Fusion included kids who are Brazilian, Burmese, Cambodian, Central African, Filipino, Ghanaian, Haitian, Ivorian, Kachin, Karen, Kenyan, Koreana, Lao, Lisu, Nigerian and Vietnamese.