

# Editorial: Jesus and Gaga Ball: Summer Camp in Texas

July 19, 2018

This week marked my son's last summer of children's camp. Next year, he begins the glorious (cough) teenage years. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

When I was his age, I was finishing my summers of Royal Ambassador camps in the mountains of New Mexico—Inlow on the east slope of the Manzanos south of Albuquerque and Sivells in the Sierra Blanca south of Cloudcroft.

For an elementary-age boy, few things compare to shooting .22 rifles and bows and arrows, making crafts from leather and stone, enjoying overnight hikes and cooking your own dinner under the stars. Equally magical were the tents we slept in all week at Sivells. Sadly, those tents were lost to a forest fire threatening the entire camp.

Less romantic was KP duty and the blisters from the army surplus canteen strung around my waist for a day hike.

What follows are some highlights from the Next Level Kids Camp 2018 at Latham Springs.

## **Day 1:**

We weren't at camp long before the incessant refrain began: "Can we go play Gaga Ball?" For those unfamiliar with the sport, I invite you to Google it or look for a [YouTube video](#) because it takes too long to explain. For now, it's enough to know Gaga Ball is highly addictive.

Dinner consisted of fajitas with all the trimmings, including pico de gallo

and guacamole. I ate as though I'd fasted the week prior to camp.

Each camp features a memory verse of the week, or MVOTW (pronounced Muh-Vawt-Wuh). Our verse was Isaiah 60:1, memorized with the help of motions: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you."

Lights out was 10:30 p.m. Don't let that fool you. Two of the boys kept their "lights" on all night, talking and giggling despite my protestations.

## **Day 2:**

Breakfast was barely over before the kids asked, "Can we go play Gaga Ball?" Morning worship was barely over before the kids asked, "Can we go play Gaga Ball?"

Camp pastor [Jesse Joyner](#), juggler extraordinaire, taught the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead and explained the concept of resurrection. Jesse's an incredible teacher and performer I recommend to anyone.

He is the son of a pastor, and he wasn't particularly happy about it. While he kept his public persona clean, his inner life was angry and rebellious. Jesse also was a small kid and not part of the "cool kids." He was bullied and pushed around and then found juggling, something he was good at and enjoyed.

Jesse came to trust Jesus at a church camp when he was 13, putting his faith in Jesus, expressing his sorrow for his sin and thanking Jesus for forgiveness. Afterward, Jesse said he felt free.

Lunch was barely swallowed before the kids asked, "Can we go play Gaga Ball?" I kid you not.

The afternoon consisted of team building games, encouraging a homesick

child, and a swim and paddle at the lake.

During worship on the evening of Day 2, three children from our church chose to follow Jesus. One of those children is part of a family I've cared for more than eight years. There's nothing like being with a family through so many life-changing decisions.

### **Day 3:**

One of the adults from our church was named Sponsor of the Day for going above and beyond in serving his kids. His reward? A bright yellow cape, fuzzy antennae and plastic clapping hands to wear all day.

We learned the story of Daniel and the lion's den from [Daniel 6](#), playing a version of rock/paper/scissors substituting in lion/administrator/Daniel.

The heat, the oppressive summer heat of Texas, is as ubiquitous as games of Gaga Ball. And how good to be forced to stop and hydrate throughout the afternoon!

Paul Bowman, co-director of Next Level Kids Camp and children's and recreation pastor at First Baptist Church in Maypearl, reported six leadership staff, two interns and 14 recreation staff members, all 22 of whom are volunteers and members of local Baptist churches. Three hundred and forty campers from 19 churches attended the camp.

One of the rec staff members was born without ligaments in his feet, making it difficult to walk. He recently had surgery to correct one foot and was still recovering before camp started. Despite the pain, he was determined to be at camp for the kids, saying: "I will be there. The kids won't know I'm in pain." He kept his promise; he gave not the slightest hint of his pain.

Frankie Levings, food service director for Latham Springs, reported making

fresh on sight more than 500 churros for dinner on Day 3. After running out, she had to make another batch. They were worth the wait.

## **Day 4:**

The children are also memorizing John 11:25-26, Daniel 6:26b and Acts 4:12. They amaze us with their ability and desire to learn.

You have to scrutinize statistics to discern the truth, but not here. The following statistics are completely made up.

Julie Swift, girls' dean for the camp and member of First Baptist Church in Grandview, said 75 romantic relationships started this week among 5th and 6th grade boys and girls. That's 150 children, folks. Ron Russek, boys' dean and member of Nolan River Road in Cleburne, said 12 such relationships started.

It's noteworthy the boys' dean reported far fewer relationships than the girls' dean. It should also be noted I spoke with Julie and Ron independently and asked them to make up the statistic. Parents, I only saw one relationship begin, starting with smiles and sheepish eyes.

The Sponsor of the Day today is Kirk Howard, a member of New Life Baptist Church in Covington, who has brought children to camp for many years. Kirk, an unassuming and gentle person, was nominated this year by one of the boys in his group. The boy has severe juvenile diabetes requiring 24-hour monitoring. The boy thanked Kirk for his willingness to care for him, waking even through the wee hours of the morning, so the boy could attend camp.

On our way to lunch, we were asked by at least three kids, "Can we go play Gaga Ball?"

As of the evening of Day 4, 36 children have decided to follow Jesus, six

have rededicated their lives to Jesus, and others have made other decisions about their relationship with God. Who knows what Day 5 will bring? That's a rhetorical question.

These stories can be repeated many times over at the other Texas Baptist camps this summer. In addition to the stories of God's work in children's lives, I'm particularly struck by the stories of the dedication of local churches, their staff and their members to create experiences for children during which they will encounter Jesus and his life-changing power. I am grateful for how my life has been changed and for what God is doing in the lives of children and adults through summer camp.

If you love children and want them to follow Jesus, you can improve the odds by sending or taking a child to summer camp at a [Texas Baptist camp](#). Talk with a church near you, a local Baptist association or one of our state camps to find out how you can get involved. Or email me.

Cara Callaway, camp nurse, said the most common ailments are headaches caused by dehydration and sprained or twisted ankles. She doesn't like Gaga Ball.

*UPDATE: After publishing this editorial, I was reminded by one of the other adult sponsors in our group of a miraculous occurrence we witnessed at one of the Gaga pits. A boy on crutches was brought by golf cart to the pits where he got off the cart and made his way up to one of the games. A moment later, the miracle happened.*

*According to the rules of Gaga Ball, if the ball leaves the pit, whoever recovers the ball from outside the pit gets to enter the game. Wait for it.*

*The ball left the pit right next to the boy on crutches, who immediately dropped his crutches and sprinted after the ball, retrieved it, sprinted back and jumped over the wall to enter the game. All the while his crutches lay on the ground. I wish I'd caught it on video with my phone, but it happened*

*so fast.*

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