



# Campfire Tales

**The summer of 2025 will be remembered for its energy, its warmth, and the way our camp community seemed to grow stronger with every passing day.** Week after week, Aaron gathered his thoughts, stories, and reflections into what became the Campfire Tales – nine chapters of our summer's journey.

Within these pages, you'll find the excitement of Opening Day, the bonds formed through shared adventures, the proud moments when campers tried something new, and the traditions that connected us to every summer that came before. **This is more than a record of events – it's a love letter to camp life, told through the lens of someone living it.**

**These short stories are for everyone who believes in what happens when we come together at Chestnut Lake Camp.**

# Campfire Tales



## Pearl(s) of Wisdom

Pre-Summer | June 11, 2025



As I write this, I'm thinking about the kids at home who are starting to feel a little nervous about camp. I'm also thinking about their parents — some of whom may be even more nervous. It's totally understandable. Whether it's your child's first time away or your fifth summer as a camp parent, there are always questions and emotions that come with the countdown to Opening Day.

Some of it comes from the unknown. If you haven't experienced camp yet — either as a camper or through your child — it's hard to imagine what it will feel like. And even if you're a "veteran," returning to camp each year brings its newness: new bunkmates, new staff, new transitions. Honestly? I feel some of that nervousness myself.

Not because I doubt what's ahead — I couldn't be more confident in our team or more excited for the summer we've planned. But the other night, as I tossed and turned, my mind wasn't on campers or counselors. It was on Pearl. You may be wondering, who's Pearl?

In November 2023, our family said goodbye to our beloved dog, Apollo. He was adopted in 2016, and over time, he became an unforgettable presence — not just at home, but at camp. Apollo had this remarkable ability to connect with campers and staff, especially those missing their pets or in need of a little comfort. He was part of our family, and part of the Chestnut Lake family, too. Losing him was hard. For a long time, we didn't think we'd ever get another dog.

But this February, we met Pearl.

Pearl is a Great Dane, around nine years old, rescued from a difficult situation in South Carolina. She's gentle, soulful, and was looking for a second chance. After just a short time with us, we knew she belonged. We slowly introduced her to camp — short visits here and there, then longer stretches. She started to find her rhythm. And last weekend, she faced her biggest challenge yet: meeting over 300 people at our annual Spring Fling for first-time campers and their families. Ann and I didn't sleep well the night before. Would she get overwhelmed? Would the noise, the excitement, the crowd be too much? Turns out, we didn't need to worry. Pearl was a star.

She was cautious at first — she took it all in, stayed close, and watched carefully. But as the day went on, she opened up. She approached people. She let herself be loved. She made friends. She figured it out. And in doing so, she reminded us of the very heart of what camp is all about.

Camp is a place where we all arrive a little uncertain. A little nervous. A little unsure of what to expect. But it's also a place where — when we're surrounded by patience, encouragement, kindness, and love — we adapt. We connect. We grow.

Pearl's day at Spring Fling wasn't just her debut as our new camp dog — it was a reminder that our campers (and their parents) are going to be okay. More than okay. They're going to rise to the moment. They're going to surprise themselves. They're going to thrive. Because that's what happens at camp. We find our footing. We make friends. We let ourselves be known and loved. And we discover, sometimes in the most unexpected ways, just how strong and capable we really are.

This summer, your child will become braver. They'll grow more independent. They'll find joy, even in moments of challenge. And they'll have a team of people (and yes, one very big dog) here to walk beside them every step of the way.

Here's to Pearl, and the beautiful journey ahead for all of us this summer.



# Campfire Tales



## Let the Summer Begin

Opening Day | June 28, 2025



In just one more day, the gates will open. The buses will pull in. And the best part of Chestnut Lake Camp – the campers – will be back where they belong.

The duffels are already here and unpacked. The campers' beds are made, and their clothes are neatly folded onto their shelves. The lake is still. The fields are ready. And our team is ready – really ready.

We've spent many days preparing this place and these people to care for your children. To make them feel safe, inspired, included, and loved. And as we put the final touches on our preparations last night, I stood in front of our incredible staff and did something I had to psych myself up to do: I sang. The song was *Forever Young* by Bob Dylan. And while the lyrics may be familiar, singing it last night felt different. You see, I've been going to camp since I was five years old. My first director – Bob Miner – was one of the greats. Every summer, he would open camp with a song called *Banks of the Ohio*. I grew up with that tradition. I sang it year after year without really thinking much about it – until I got older and realized the lyrics were, well...about a man murdering his fiancée by throwing her into the Ohio River. Not the "campiest" theme.

When I became the director of that very same camp years later, I quietly retired that tradition. Not because there was something wrong with the song. It worked for Bob. But it didn't work for me. I realized something important: when I sing to campers and staff, I want the words to mean something to me. Now, when I pick songs to share at Community Campfire, I choose ones that reflect what I believe camp is all about. Songs that carry a message, or that speak to something I want to say (but maybe I can't find the words for myself). And last night, I stepped out of my comfort zone a bit and sang something new – well, new to me. *Forever Young* is, in many ways, everything I would want to say to your children, if I had just one song to do it.

***May you always be courageous, stand upright and be strong.***

That's what camp makes possible. Courage in the little moments. Strength is found in new friendships, in first tries, in small victories. And our staff – this incredible, talented, thoughtful group of humans – is here to help your children discover just how brave and capable they are. They've trained hard. They've asked good questions. Furthermore, they've leaned into the work. And they are so ready – not just to lead activities or manage bunks, but to show up for your children with kindness, presence, and heart.

***May you build a ladder to the stars, and climb on every rung.***

Camp doesn't fast-forward through the hard parts. It meets kids where they are. Whether it's making a friend, getting through a tough moment, or finding joy in something new, growth happens here, rung by rung. And every child's ladder looks a little different. That's what makes this place so special.

***May you grow up to be righteous, may you grow up to be true.***

This isn't just a break from school or screens or schedules. It's a space where values take root. Where kids learn how to live alongside others, how to listen, how to lead, how to be themselves, and be part of something bigger than themselves. At Chestnut Lake, that's the core of what we do. And I believe that's what will stay with your child long after the last day of camp.

***May your hands always be busy, may your feet always be swift.***

The summer ahead will be filled with action. With laughter. With friendship and music, and movement. With stories told under stars, games played in the sun, and moments that will be remembered for years to come. And in all of it, your child will be supported. Seen. Loved.

So today, before the joyful chaos begins, I wanted to share a simple truth with you: we are ready. Your child's place is here. Their people are waiting. And this summer – steeped in song, community, growth, and heart – is going to be unforgettable. Let the music play. Let the summer begin.

# Campfire Tales



## The First to Walk the Path

Week 1 | July 4, 2025



The first week of camp is wrapping up, and if you've ever been part of a camp community, you know what a big deal that is. That first week is everything. It sets the tone. It's when friendships are sparked, trust is built, routines take shape, and the air starts to feel like summer in a way that only camp can deliver. And here at Chestnut Lake, the first week has been, in a word: amazing.

The kids have been all-in, trying new things, making new friends, showing kindness, and cheering each other on. The staff have been exactly what we hoped for — present, prepared, and full of heart. Even the weather has smiled on us, which is not something we take for granted in the Poconos. We've had some of those golden summer days that feel like they were tailor-made for running around, lake excitement, and community campfires. But what's really made the week stand out isn't just the fun or the sunshine. It's something deeper. It's leadership.

Leadership is one of those things we talk about a lot at camp — not because it's a buzzword, but because it's a living, breathing part of everything we do. At Chestnut Lake, leadership isn't about being the loudest voice or the one with the most experience. It's about presence. It's about intention. It's about knowing that your energy affects others in your cabin group, the people at an activity, and choosing to make that energy positive.

And this summer, we're seeing that kind of leadership show up in all corners of camp. We're seeing it in counselors who kneel to talk to a camper with kindness and empathy. We're seeing it in Division Leaders who stay up late to make sure everything's just right for the next day. We're seeing it in quiet moments — when a program leader includes a camper who's standing off to the side, or when a staff member picks some trash up off the ground without being asked. But there's one group that I want to highlight, because what they're doing is not only meaningful — it's brave.

This summer marks the beginning of our revamped Leadership Training (LT) Program, and we have eight returning teens who stepped up to be the first to walk this new path. These are campers who have grown up at Chestnut Lake. They know the traditions, the way it feels to be a camper here. And now, they're in the in-between: no longer campers, not quite staff, but something entirely new. They are trailblazers. That word — trailblazer — feels right. Because what these teens are doing isn't just participating in a program that already exists. They're building it. With the help of a dynamic team of staff members, they're shaping what this program will become for years to come. They're leaning into the unknown. They're choosing to lead without needing credit, to serve without needing recognition, and to give without expecting anything in return.

On their very first day, we asked them to reflect on what kind of leaders they wanted to be. They were given a simple prompt and a big question. What they gave back was something honest and real. "We're learning to lead by doing. We want to be patient and calm but also assertive and clear. We want to show up, be open-minded, and work together. We want to lead by example, by choice — not just because someone tells us to." Those aren't the words of teens pretending to be leaders. Those are the words of young adults who are already leading.

This week, they've helped our cabin staff, supported younger campers, and quietly stepped into moments that needed care. They've practiced being calm when things get loud. They've worked behind the scenes to make camp stronger. They've stayed curious and thoughtful, and reflective. And perhaps most importantly, they've paid attention. And today, they even navigated how you serve Snow Cones without a working Snow Cone machine.

There's something powerful about being the first. It means you don't have a blueprint. It means you take a few steps into the dark, trusting that something good is on the other side. And when you do it right, you don't just find your way — you leave something behind for others to follow. That's what these eight trailblazers are doing. They're not just walking a new path. They're building one with courage, character, and a lot of heart.

As we close out Week One, I'm filled with gratitude. For our campers, for our staff, for the sunshine and the silly songs and the sound of kids laughing under the trees. But also — and especially — for the leaders in the making who are reminding us of what it looks like to grow into yourself, right here in the middle of camp. The trail they're walking is one worth following. And I can't wait to see where it leads next.

# Campfire Tales



## What You See & What You Don't

Week 2 | July 11, 2025



Here at Chestnut Lake, we're deep into the second week of First Session. The sun is shining most of the time, the lake is full of splashes and laughter, and the kids are busy being exactly what they should be: campers. It's that sweet spot in the summer where routines are taking hold, friendships are locking in a bit more, and moments of joy happen before anyone even realizes how fun they are.

Each morning around 5:00 AM, before camp even stirs awake, I get a news briefing with any stories about summer camps across the country. Most days, it's minor stuff – a fun event, a trend piece, or maybe a local camp in the news. But in the last week, like many of you, I was stopped in my tracks by the devastating stories out of Texas. The flash flooding, the loss of life, the heartbreak that swept through that region – there are no words for the depth of sadness felt across the camping world. It certainly reminds us here that – even with no risk of flooding like was seen near the Guadalupe River – we have to stay vigilant in our efforts to protect your children.

And yet, here at Chestnut, the camp day continues. Kids are running, climbing, practicing for Lip Sync, flying across the lake on skis, and building friendships that will last well beyond the end of the session. There's joy in every corner. And for many of you at home, that joy is mostly coming through in the form of a photo or video. You refresh the Campanian app, you watch another social media post play on your phone, you squint at a thumbnail, maybe zoom in on a blurry face in the back of a group shot, and wonder: Is that my kid? Are they smiling? Is that the same T-shirt again? Are they...okay?

At Chestnut Lake, our Communications Team works around the clock – often literally – to bring camp to life for families at home. As of right now, we've uploaded over 10,000 photos. That's not a typo. Ten thousand photos in 12 days. And that doesn't include video editing, social media, and everything else they do. It's an incredible amount of work for a team that also lives in bunks, leads activities, and still somehow manages to be in the right place to capture your camper's moments.

But here's the truth: no matter how many photos we post, the photos never tell the full story:

- They don't show the inside joke that the kids will be laughing about all night that's just off-camera.
- They don't capture the relief on a child's face when a counselor helps them navigate a tough moment.
- They don't include the shy or too busy camper to be captured on film by the one camera nearby.
- They don't reflect how it felt to get to the top of the climbing wall after 3 tries – or how loud someone's friends cheered when they did.
- And they don't even get taken when the photographer realizes that the moment they're seeing is too special, too personal, or too perfect to risk ruining with the imposition of a staff member's digital camera.

And yes, sometimes your camper might look tired in a photo. Because they are. Camp is full of long, amazing days. Sometimes they're not smiling because they didn't see the camera about to shoot a photo. Or because they're concentrating. Or maybe they're just thinking about whether their S'more from last night counts as dinner. Sometimes a kid's not in a photo because they were in the bathroom. Or refilling their water bottle. Or just not in the mood to be on camera. That's allowed, too.

In light of what's happened in Texas, I think we all feel the stakes a little differently. The urge to see our kids, to know they're okay, to have evidence that they are safe and cared for – it's powerful. And real. But I hope you'll let the photos be a glimpse, not a diagnosis. I hope you'll remember that the truest parts of camp – the ones that will last – are happening whether the camera is there or not.

What we promise at Chestnut Lake is this: your children are known, cared for, celebrated, and surrounded by adults who take their responsibility seriously. They're having the time of their lives – and we'll do our best to show you pieces of that. But we also know that camp isn't meant to be viewed through a screen. It's meant to be lived. So please keep looking at the photos. Enjoy them. Laugh at the messy hair and the muddy clothes. Zoom in if you must. Just know that the real story is unfolding in ways no photo can fully capture. And when your child comes home – exhausted, hoarse, missing a bunch of socks, full of stories – you'll get the full picture then.



# Campfire Tales

## When the Colors Fade

Week 3 | July 18, 2025



There's a low hum that's growing louder across camp, just under the surface. You hear it in the pauses after announcements. You see it in the whispered guesses between campers at the close of an all-camp program at night. You can feel it in the smirks exchanged between seasoned staff or veteran campers who already know what's coming. Tribal is near.

We don't announce the date. We don't hint. We don't post a schedule. Because at Chestnut Lake Camp, Tribal isn't just an event –

it's an awakening. When it breaks, everything shifts. Campers scream, staff erupt, and just like that, we are split into two great tribes: Minsi (White) and Unami (Green). For three unforgettable days, our shared world is transformed. Friends become friendly rivals. Chants grow loud. The entire community leans into something that is at once ancient and brand new. And at the center of it all are the Chiefs – four counselors, two for each tribe, selected to lead. They don't apply for it. They don't campaign. They are chosen. They're chosen because they live what Chestnut Lake stands for. Every day. In every moment. Being a Chief is not about standing out. It's about showing up. The Chiefs are the ones who have consistently led with character, humility, humor, and care. They're the counselors who check in on a quiet camper after dinner, who rally a group not with ego but with empathy, and who embody what it means to be a role model – even when no one's watching.

In an article from The Wall Street Journal, the Color War "Captain" was described as the new summer status symbol. There were drones in the sky, ping pong balls falling from helicopters, and parents livestreaming dramatic announcement ceremonies like red carpet reveals. We all want to celebrate our kids. But what we've created here at Chestnut Lake is something different. Here, the moment isn't about being seen. It's about being worthy of being followed. The title of Chief is not a reward. It's a responsibility. And we chose counselors because we believe that it's the counselors at Chestnut that have the most influence on our campers' experience – they are the engine that powers Chestnut in so many ways. We believe that every counselor at Chestnut Lake is a potential Chief. Whether they're leading a tribe, helping to run an activity, or simply guiding their bunk with patience and love, each of them can model the kind of leadership that lasts long after camp is over.

Years ago, I wrote about Color War as one of the most contradictory but profound parts of camp. After spending the entire summer building a unified community, we suddenly split it in two. Minsi. Unami. White. Green. Friends land on opposite teams. The very people who helped campers feel at home now face off as competitors. And yet, it works. It works because Tribal is not about breaking us – it's about revealing us. It's about testing the strength of the bonds we've built. And it shows us, repeatedly, that we can disagree, compete, and still come back together stronger. What I wrote then still holds: "Color War continues as much because of the challenge of having friends on different sides as it does despite it...when Color War is over, the colors fade." But the growth doesn't. The impact doesn't.

As epic as the "Break" (the announcement of Tribal's start and the introduction of the session's Chiefs) of Tribal is – and it will be epic – the moment I always remember most comes later. It's after the final chant. After the last event ends. When the face paint begins to wash off, and voices have gone hoarse. It's the moment when the Chiefs from both sides hug in the center of camp. When the campers who spent days cheering for different teams sit down together and smile at what they just shared. It's quiet. It's human. It's real. Because Tribal, at its core, is not about division. It's about demonstrating that we can live on different sides of something and still care deeply for one another. That we can compete – and compete fiercely – and still come back together. That we are strong in White, strong in Green... but strongest in the brilliant blend we become after the colors collide.

Every summer, new Chiefs are named. But they aren't replacing the ones who came before – they're continuing something. Something deeply human. Something this world needs more of. We need leaders who lead by listening. Leaders who cheer others on more than themselves. Leaders who compete with honor, love without condition, and know that their greatest strength lies not in what they win, but in how they carry themselves while they do it. That's what being a Chief means here.

So yes, Tribal is coming. And yes, it will be unforgettable. But what matters most isn't when it starts. What matters most is who our community becomes when the colors fade.

# Campfire Tales



## This Camp. These Kids. This Summer.

Week 4 | July 25, 2025



Tomorrow morning, campers will drag themselves out of bed after a terrible night's sleep, pack away their special Banquet gift, look once more for their favorite hat that's been missing since the day that they hopped off the bus, and say goodbye to the place they've called home for the past four weeks. There will be tears for some, and more than a few "see you next summer" fist-bumps and hugs.

After the rush of departures, more than 100 campers will stay behind — trying to recover from the disappearance of their friends in time to greet their families for Visiting Day. And while there's still plenty of summer ahead, this moment — the close of First Session — deserves to be held up, honored, and shared. Because something remarkable happened here these past four weeks. Something real. We watched a camper go from sitting quietly during the first lunch of the session to being the main character of their division's Lip Sync performance (and he brought the house down!). We saw a group of 10-year-old girls leave notes under each other's pillows — encouraging a friend who was having a tough day. We witnessed an entire audience stand and cheer for a camper who had just finished their solo at last night's camp show. And we heard from a parent, midway through the session, who wrote to say, "This is the happiest I've ever seen my child — and I haven't even seen him in person yet. I can feel it in his letters."

That's the kind of magic camp creates — the kind that isn't about trickery or spectacle, but about connection, courage, and a deep sense of belonging. The talks on the platforms. The walks back from the lake. The "we got this" pep talks before a game against another camp. The thrill of scoring that one goal, or the sense of pride when tasting your first-ever homemade banana muffin. The pride felt in Tribal, and then the joy of not caring who won at all. These are the small, everyday moments that have added up to something unforgettable. As Michael Thompson, Ph.D., author of *Homesick and Happy*, wrote, "At camp, children have a chance to really find out who they are — to discover a version of themselves they didn't know existed. It's one of the few places where they get to do that without the gaze of their parents, their teachers, or a screen." We see it every summer. And this session, it was especially clear. We saw it in the way new campers settled in by the end of the first week — how even the most tentative goodbyes turned into beaming group photos. We saw it in the way returning campers stepped up as leaders, modeling kindness and confidence in quiet, everyday ways. And we saw it on nights like Tribal Rope Burn — where the fire wasn't the only thing igniting something powerful.

*To the parents: Thank you. Thank you for trusting us. For sharing your child with us. For believing in this experience even when it meant stepping back. We don't take that lightly. We hope you see a little extra light in your child's eyes when they return home — and we hope you'll hear stories that make you laugh, feel a sense of pride in your child, and maybe even tear up just a little.*

*To the staff: You did it. You created this. With every game, every bunk chat, every conflict you helped resolve, every late-night laugh, and every early morning Revelie — you brought this place to life. Camp doesn't work without you. And the impact you've made will stretch far beyond these four weeks.*

*To the campers heading home: You were part of something special. You took chances. You made new friends. You had fun — a lot of it. But more than that, you helped make this community feel like family. Camp will be here when you come back, and so will we. Until then, carry a little piece of Chestnut with you. You earned it.*

*And to the campers staying on for Second Session: We're just getting started.*

One of my favorite reflections about the power of camp comes from an essay by educator and camp professional Peg Smith: "Camp gives kids a world of good — a chance to grow independent, to stretch, to stumble, and to soar... And when camp is at its best, it helps kids become not just better campers, but better people." That's what this summer has felt like. So here's to the memories we've made, the friendships we've built, and the courage we've witnessed. Here's to the first-timers who became lifelong campers. Here's to the camp veterans keeping the spirit alive. Here's to the bunk cheers, the leaps from the Blob, the late-night laughs, the Pickleball rally, and the moments no one else will ever quite understand.

This camp. These kids. This summer. We're so proud. We're so grateful. And we can't wait for what comes next.

# Campfire Tales



## Counselors They'll Remember

Week 5 (Week 1 - Second Session) | August 1, 2025



There's a very particular kind of magic in the air at Chestnut Lake right now. Week 5 is a moment of beautiful tension — a balance of beginnings and endings, of fresh starts and deep roots. On one hand, we welcomed a brand-new wave of Second Session campers just four days ago — wide-eyed, eager, and ready to dive into everything. On the other hand, we have an amazing group of Full Summer campers who are already five weeks into their journey — seasoned, confident, now serving as bunk leaders, torch-bearers of tradition, and mentors for the newer kids.

This week also marked the start of Discovery Camp, a special five-day experience designed for younger campers to dip their toes into the Chestnut Lake experience. These sixty kids packed a full summer's worth of excitement into less than a week — and now head home with paint on their arms, songs in their heads, new friendships formed, and hopefully, the start of a long camp story that's just beginning. All of these experiences — the firsts, the middles, and even the goodbyes — are different. But they are all rooted in the same core truth: Camp is about connection.

And that connection is so often made real through one person: a counselor.

I've told this story before, but it feels especially important right now. It was 1982. I was twelve years old. It was another summer at my camp, and what I wanted more than anything in the world was a pair of high-top Converse Weapon basketball sneakers — not just any pair, but the exact pair that my counselor Todd wore. Looking back, I didn't really want the sneakers. I just wanted to be like him. Todd was from Maryland, and he would someday become an attorney — a world away from my home in Philadelphia, where my future career plans had me playing point guard alongside Andrew Toney for the Sixers. He was charismatic and brilliant. He told stories that made you sit up straighter. He played the Grateful Dead and talked about faraway places. He went to Emory, and he had a girlfriend. He wasn't perfect. But Todd had a kind of gravity to him. When he spoke, you listened. When he asked you how you were doing, he seemed to actually mean it. He didn't talk down to us. He didn't perform. He showed up — every single day — and made us feel like we mattered. He was the first person outside my family who made me feel truly seen.

Fast-forward to now. This week, I watched a first-time camper cry on the first night — missing home, overwhelmed, unsure. One of our counselors sat beside him for almost an hour, gently coaxing out a smile. That same camper led the cheers the next morning at Flag Football when his team scored the tying touchdown. I saw a Discovery Camper nervously eyeing the Aqua Park (Wibit), uncertain she could make it even off of the dock. Her counselor — all encouragement, no pressure — offered a quiet "you've got this." That camper made it to the top of "Number 4" and jumped off into the water without a care in the world. And I saw a few Full Summer campers who now are the Todds — sitting at picnic tables at Chestnut Commons with some old and new campers, laughing, explaining the difference between Varsity-1 and Varsity-2, and modeling the kind of connection that campers who have been at Chestnut for at least a few summer understand and value. And then there are the counselors. The job of a counselor is, in some ways, impossible to explain and impossible to overstate. They are substitute parents, older siblings, life coaches, cheerleaders, conflict mediators, teachers, and buddies — often all in the same day. They stay up late and get up early. They deal with bug spray and homesickness, group dynamics and lost water bottles. They lead chants and tie shoes, teach lessons and wipe away tears. And while they may not realize it yet, they are shaping memories that your children will carry with them for decades. There are kids here at Chestnut Lake this summer — right now — who have already decided that they want to come back someday not just as campers, but as counselors. And not because it looks easy. Not because it's always fun. But because they see the impact being made on them, and they want to pass that forward. That's the counselor effect. That's what Todd gave me. That's what I see happening here every day.

I'll never forget the day that summer closed in 1982. The session ended, as it always does, too soon. Most of us filed out with high-fives and half-smiles, not sure how to say what we were feeling. I was the last to leave my bunk, dragging my feet, holding back tears. Todd saw me. He walked over, hugged me (maybe the first real hug I ever got from a male role model who wasn't family), and told me he was proud of me. He reminded me of what I'd done that summer — what I'd learned — and then he disappeared into the sea of counselors and trunks. Many hours later, when I unpacked at home, I found his red and white Converse sneakers in the bottom of my bag. He had left them there. No note. No fanfare. Just a life-altering gesture. That summer — and that counselor — never left me. They're part of the reason I do what I do now.

And so when I look around Chestnut Lake in Week 5, I know exactly what I'm seeing. I'm seeing lives being changed. I'm seeing futures being shaped. I'm seeing kids who, someday, will talk about this summer. About this camp. And about these counselors. Here's to a great last couple of weeks!



# Campfire Tales



## Real Leadership

Week 6 (Week 2 - Second Session) | August 8, 2025



We're six weeks into camp, and at this point in the summer, I've seen enough to be reminded that leadership here doesn't always look like a keynote speech or a flawless plan. Sometimes it looks like a Mato camper sprinting toward the end zone, clutching the football like a hot potato as he realizes he's about to score for the first time. Or a Wakanda camper showing plate discipline, drawing a walk to score a run in a big inter-camp game. Or even a Varsity camper putting their arm around a friend and quietly helping them through a tough moment in the middle of an up-and-down day. We are two-thirds of

the way through this session — and six-sevenths of the way through the summer — and what's been built here is more than schedules, programs, or Tribal points. We've built leaders. Some of them are 9 years old, some are 19, and some are staff members who didn't even realize they had it in them until now.

When I wrote an article for Camping Magazine a few years ago, I admitted that my camp-director "skills" were, well, eclectic:

- I can spin a basketball on my finger.
- I can referee seven different sports, design a T-shirt, format a newsletter, drive a 26-foot box truck, and properly stern a canoe.
- I can mount a framed photo without a ruler, and I've repaired both a window screen and a meaningful relationship more than a few times.
- I can make a really great form.

Some of these, I'll admit, I've probably gotten too good at while struggling to improve at things that might matter a bit more to camp's success (and my own). Others — like belaying on the high ropes course, starting a golf cart without an actual key, or calming a parent who isn't getting the answer they want — I've learned out of necessity. This is the thing about leadership at camp: it's not just about what you set out to learn. It's about what the job throws at you — and how you handle it. Carol Dweck calls it a "growth mindset," the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. Camp is essentially a graduate course in that regard. You wake up, step outside, and something — often unexpected — will come your way that you'll need to figure out.

I've seen that same pattern in our campers and staff this summer:

- The counselor who ran a fantastic Arts & Crafts activity with pure enthusiasm — even though the supply order they'd been counting on never arrived.
- The older camper who volunteered to be goalie in soccer for the first time and then stopped two penalty shots in one game.
- The first-time campers who stood on stage at our Community Campfire and spoke beautifully about a new friend being honored with a Community Service Award — even though they'd met less than a week before.
- The bunk that secretly made friendship bracelets for their counselor, who was missing home, just to make sure she knew how much she mattered here.

These moments don't happen because someone read a manual on leadership. They happen because we've built a community where people jump in, try, fail, adjust, try again — and where those actions are noticed and celebrated. Now comes the final stretch. This is when leadership matters most — when routines are second nature, when it would be easy to coast. This is the time to double down: to lead loudly by cheering your team through the last Tribal event (which could break at any moment), and to lead quietly by spotting the camper sitting alone and inviting them into the game.

I've been doing this for a long time, and I can say without question that I'm already the luckiest I can be. Luck got me here, but leadership — mine, and yours — is what keeps making this place extraordinary. So let's finish strong. Let's add a few more skills to our tool belts, a few more stories to our highlight reel, and a few more moments where someone surprises themselves with what they're capable of. That's how leaders are made here — one unexpected challenge, one person doing something special to make a difference, and one great camp day at a time.

# Campfire Tales

## One for the Books

Week 7 (Week 3 - Second Session) | August 16, 2025



There's a certain hum that fills camp in the final week – a sound that's equal parts joy, exhaustion, and an unspoken understanding that these days are numbered. It's the laughter that carries across the fields at dusk, the way voices in the dining hall hit a slightly higher pitch, and the quiet conversations between friends who know they're about to be apart. It's the sound of a summer's worth of living, pressed into its final pages.

Over the past seven weeks, 654 campers have called Chestnut Lake home, and 246 staff members have poured themselves into making sure those

campers had a summer they'll carry forever. That's thousands of moments spent connecting, millions of footsteps across camp, and more than a few well-timed reminders to "please put your sneakers on before going to tennis – Crocs are not good enough." We've come a long way since the start of Second Session. Back then, the new campers were figuring out the map of this place – not just where things were, but where they belonged in it. In those early days, I wrote about how campers grow; constantly grow – but watching it happen is still like magic every time. The kid who could barely meet my eyes when they stepped off the bus is now belting out the Alma Mater at the top of their lungs (especially the "I'm Chestnut 'til I die..." part at the end). The first-time counselor who thought "leading a bunk" meant giving orders learned quickly that it's about listening, laughing, and sometimes sitting quietly with a camper who just needs to be heard.

We had plenty of the headline events. Tribal returned with all its energy – a few days when camp split into Unami and Minsi, competed like their lives depended on it, and then hugged like nothing had ever been at stake. We had our helicopter landing, our fireworks, our banquets, our magician and Wizards. These are the moments that make the photo albums and the highlight videos. However, the important information is often found in the spaces between. In the quiet moment before a bunk takes the stage. The counselor who notices the homesick camper before anyone else. The smile that spreads across a camper's face when they finally hit the target, make it to the top of the climbing wall, or just realize that they belong here. There's a saying in Michael Thompson's *Homesick and Happy*: "Camp is not built on the big events, but on the thousands of small human exchanges that make children feel known, valued, and part of something larger than themselves."

Writers have been trying to put the magic of camp into words for decades. In *The Summer Camp Handbook*, Jon Malinowski and my good friend Chris Thurber write: "Camp is a place where you can be your truest self – because everyone else is, too." That's been true here every day this summer. My colleague Steve Baskin once quoted a camper who told him, "In three weeks here, I got back so much of the confidence I'd lost." I've seen that in our campers this summer – the return of confidence, the discovery of independence, the joy of finding a place where they are free to be fully themselves. And Lenore Skenazy, in an article for *Let Grow*, said it plainly: "Camp works because it gives kids a community, a purpose, and the space to try." This summer, our kids tried everything – from the high ropes to waterskiing to making up an original dance or song in front of hundreds of people. And whether they succeeded or not, they were braver for trying.

In the years to come, we'll remember the big events. But what will stay with us – the thing that makes this summer unforgettable – will be the people. The 800 individuals who trusted us with their summer, and the friendships that will outlast the tan lines sure to fade as everyone leaves through the Main Gate soon. As we pack the duffels and watch the buses pull away, I'm reminded of what Anne Lamott once wrote: "Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining." Ann and I feel it's our mission – joined by an exceptional team of professionals and seasonal leaders – to be that lighthouse, standing firmly on a foundation of commitment to excellence and integrity, ensuring that every child and adult who arrives and departs knows how to find their way with our never-ending light. This summer, Chestnut Lake shone.

Soon, everyone will be home. The days will be quieter. Laundry will get done (eventually). And then, after the grass at camp has regained its green luster following a summer full of fun, someone will text a bunkmate a random emoji, and the whole summer will come rushing back. Because Chestnut Lake isn't just a place. It's a feeling. It's a community. Likewise, it's proof that under the open sky, surrounded by friends, we grow. And those moments of growth will be etched into our minds and souls forever.

So thank you – campers, staff, parents – for making this summer one for the books. Now, go home, tell your stories, and start counting down the days to next summer.

# Campfire Tales



## Why I Write These Weekly Posts



Summer at Chestnut Lake is busy, joyful, and full of moments that matter — the big, loud ones and the quiet, subtle ones. **We want our parents to feel connected to what's happening here, but not at the expense of the campers truly living it.** That's why we communicate in so many ways: daily social media posts, highlight videos, thousands of photos, and updates from our team. Each of those serves a purpose, giving you glimpses into camp life without pulling kids out of the experience.

**The Campfire Tales are different.** They aren't a play-by-play or a catalog of everything that happens. Instead, they're meant to tell the story of the summer one chapter at a time — to share the heart, the humor, and the lessons that rise above the daily schedule. **They're my way of slowing things down, reflecting on what's taking shape, and inviting you to step inside the world your kids are building with us.**

**Our philosophy is simple: we're a kid-centric camp.** We run with purpose and structure, but always leave room for freedom, for choice, and for kids to feel like this is their place. We want staff to feel that same sense of ownership — to lead and to learn alongside campers. The result is a community that's guided, but never micromanaged; safe, but never stifled; full of traditions, yet always open to new possibilities.

**When I write these Campfire Tales, I'm thinking about what it feels like here. Not just what we do, but why we do it.** They're about the courage it takes to try something new, the friendships that become the highlight of a year, and the meaning in having a place where you can be wholly yourself. My hope is that, as you read, you can feel the warmth of the fire, hear the sounds of camp in the background, and understand a little more about why we believe this can be one of the greatest places in the world for a kid to grow up.

Think Camp!





**SUMMER**

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