

**CONFIDENCE, COURAGE AND CLARITY**



**SUMMER CAMP**

*Sentinel Hometown News Winter Guide 2025*

# CIT PROGRAMS

To sustain and strengthen camp culture, make the most of your counselor-in-training program.

By Whitney Ryan

There are many pressures and opportunities facing elder camper groups. The CIT (counselor-in-training or similar) program is an often overlooked opportunity for sustaining and strengthening camp culture and optimizing the future leaders and staff of camp.

There are several components that, when fit together, complete the puzzle of a strong program for your future camp leaders.

### Skills

The CIT program must have tangible takeaways for each group to engage with the program. They need to depart from the summer with certifications and achievements that are credentialed and meaningful to the world outside camp. Some examples are Lifeguard Training Certification, CPR, First Aid, AED, and Wilderness First Aid. In addition, some camp-specific credentials for leadership training can be equally useful to CITs following their summers. Armed with certifications, CITs can build on these resume-building experiences and become stronger job candidates and school leaders. Address how they can depart camp better prepared for many aspects of life outside of camp and rehearse how the CITs can speak about their skill development in prospective admissions or job interviews.

### Camp Philosophy

This captures the why of their summer. Some CITs return because of the friend group and others because it is what they are expected to do. It is important to work to have the group come together for the why of their camp's philosophy and guiding principles. The CIT year is a time of transition when they can more fully embrace the history while intentionally engaging in moving camp forward into the future. The CITs experience camp for the first time beyond themselves and for others. It is their camp and they make a difference in campers' lives and shape the camp ethos.

### Teamwork

The emphasis on teamwork helps set the CIT group up for successes individually and as a group. There are many camp tasks that can effectively be executed by the CIT group, including daily event and special event planning and operation. Any instances that will help the group with meaningful opportunities to plan, to lead and to successfully carry through on an event or a camp tradition will begin to empower the group and create team earned successes. Avoid merely assigning the CITs the undesirable camp jobs that the full counselors are averse to doing. You may also charge the group with developing new camp traditions, ranging from special campfires to composing a new camp song!

*Continued on page 15*



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# FIFTY YEARS

## muddy boots, inspiring views, and empowering young women on the Appalachian Trail

By Emma DeCamp (AMT Camper, 2010; Leader, 2023)

Alford Lake Camp has been empowering girls to become strong, independent, confident women since 1907. By the time they are 15, many campers are hungry to take the strength and confidence gained through their summers in camp and embark upon one of ALC's Global Challenge Trips. To be eligible to go on the trip, campers must have spent summers in camp at ALC, learning not only the tangible skills needed for the trip (setting up tents, packing a pack, etc.), but perhaps more significantly, learning critical interpersonal skills - empathy, confidence, friendship, and more. The first of these trips began in 1975.

This coming June will mark the 50th summer Alford Lake Camp sends out its Appalachian Mountain Trip (AMT), a 7-week backpacking voyage for 15-year-old campers covering over 300 miles of the Appalachian Trail from Katahdin in Maine to the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Though the equipment and times have changed since 1975—from external to internal frame packs and from denim shorts to quick-dry baggies—the impact endures.

This trip is like no other, sending young people into the wilderness for 7 weeks each summer for 50 years. No one, not even NOLS or Outward Bound, organizes youth backpacking trips this long, not now and not in 1975. Even hikers who traverse the entire Appalachian Trail typically don't stay out for more than a week or two without heading into a town for a shower or a night in a real bed. **"You guys are out here for seven weeks straight?"** impressed thru-hikers will often ask AMT groups. AMT never leaves trail, not unless someone gets sick or injured. Over the years, ALC has streamlined a system of driving resupplies out to the group at trail-road intersections.

474 people (76% female) share memories of walking, for days on end, across pine needle carpets, slick bog bridges, and boulders splotted with lichen. **"The magic of AMT is honestly indescribable to anyone who hasn't been on the trip. You can tell them about the experience as best you can, but the only**

*Continued on page 18*



Peter Barhydt and Tim Pierpont in 1983 on the AMT.

## A Summer That Shaped a Lifetime

Forty-two years ago, my best friend Tim and I joined a seven-week co-ed hiking trip along the Appalachian Trail. We were fifteen. Our parents signed us up for the Appalachian Mountain Trip (AMT VIII), run by Alford Lake Camp of Union, Maine. We started at Mount Katahdin and ended near Mount Washington. That program still runs today, and 2025 marks its 50th year.

I recently found a photo from that trip. Tim and I, grinning, likely unshowered and proud. We're still close friends. We stood in each other's weddings, our wives are friends, and though we live on opposite coasts, we make a point to see each other every year.

That summer was unforgettable. Every night, we slept outside. We hiked daily—rain or shine—through some of the most remote wilderness in the Northeast. We saw wildlife. We hiked the 100-Mile Wilderness. We didn't have phones, screens, or even much contact with the outside world. It was 1983.

The memories rush back easily: girls singing in harmony as we hiked in the rain, plunging into freezing pools formed by snow runoff, climbing fire towers for views that stretched for miles. One night we evacuated a fellow hiker for a suspected burst appendix. We carried backpacks weighing more than sixty pounds. Every step came with a story.

Looking back, I feel deep gratitude—for my parents and for Alford Lake Camp. Jean McMullan, and now Sue McMullan, led that program with vision and heart. They built something rare: an experience that shaped lives. My parents, and Tim's, believed that seven weeks in the woods would offer something formative to two teenage boys—something we couldn't find anywhere else.

### **They were right.**

What can a 15-year-old boy learn on the trail? Everything. How to live with a dozen peers day and night. How to resolve conflict face to face. How to trust and be trusted. How to push forward in cold rain when you're miles from camp. You learn what it means to be essential to a group that depends on you.

The trail teaches self-awareness, perseverance, humility, and the value of community. You can't hide on the trail. You show up. Every day.

Today, I'm proud of what Tim and I accomplished. Not just the distance, but the endurance, the teamwork, the personal growth. I wonder what it would be like now—could I do it again in an age of smartphones, news alerts, and takeout delivery? I'm not sure. But I'd love to try.

Camps like Alford Lake that still offer programs like AMT are providing something rare and necessary: real connection to the outdoors, real challenges, and real friendships. These programs should be celebrated and supported. They create lifelong memories, lessons, and maybe, a photo of two best friends on a trail—still smiling decades later.

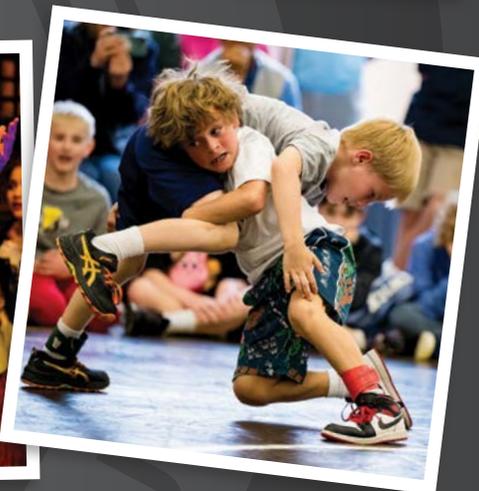
*Peter Barhydt is Manager Editor of the Sentinel Hometown News.*

# Summer Session & Sports Camps

SUMMER 2025

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# DE-SCREENING FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Aloha's Technology-Free Pocket in the Natural World

In the many conversations I've had with families in the last several months about deciding if Aloha—or any camp—is right for their teenager, one key element keeps emerging as an important factor: we don't have our cell phones. It's true! It can be done! And parents are focused in on this difference more than ever.â

I think they realize that one of the best gifts they can give their kids is time without having to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders (or in their pocket), and instead, offer them a space in a community that is uplifting, tight-knit, and face-to-face. At Aloha, our campers get a pause from the constant stream of information they (and all of us!) experience the rest of the year. Instead of tuning out, I like to think of this as tuning in – to themselves, to their community, and their surroundings. At each of our camps, we believe this is vital for camper health and wellbeing.

In today's digital age, teenagers spend an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes per day on screens for entertainment purposes alone, according to a recent report by Common Sense Media. That's almost a full-time job worth of screen time! This constant exposure to screens can lead to increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Those important face-to-face interactions and meaningful conversations are replaced by digital interactions, hindering the development of empathy, communication skills, and emotional intelligence.

By unplugging from screens and immersing themselves in nature, teenagers can cultivate resilience, self-confidence, and authentic connections with their peers. Instead of sitting on their beds and scrolling in their free time, our campers are playing card games with a tentmate or inventing a new game on



the athletic field. These small pockets of time allow a feeling of community to be nurtured where isolation would have been before.

During our Visiting Weekend last summer, the midpoint of our two 3.5-week sessions, a camp dad told me that his daughter (who chose to stay for the full seven weeks) had NO interest in borrowing his phone, and instead chose to sit on the porch conversing with her friends and their families. He confided in me that this was a massive change from the rest of the year, and he was thrilled to see it!

The same weekend, I spoke with the parent of another camper who happened to be a political refugee. She said the absolute best thing for her daughter was being away from the news. It had become an unhealthy addiction for her to stay constantly connected to events in her home country, and her mom was

glad for this change. Activities with peers like hiking Crawford Notch, swimming in Lake Morey, and our nightly ritual of Evening Circle all help to replace those anxious feelings often associated with an electronic device, while promoting physical health and emotional resilience. Is it any wonder she can't wait to come to camp at Aloha again next summer?

Studies have long shown that spending time in nature can significantly benefit teenage mental health, and while the idea of tech-free summer camps may seem daunting, the long-term benefits far outweigh the temporary inconvenience or discomfort. By supporting our teenagers in taking substantial breaks from technology (weeks at a time even!), we empower them to prioritize their mental health, cultivate resilience, and embrace a more balanced and fulfilling lifestyle that will serve them long into adulthood.

*Charlotte Messervy.*

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THAT'S WHAT SUMMER CAMPS DELIVERS.

YOU DON'T SEND YOUR KID TO CAMP TO STAY BUSY.  
YOU SEND THEM TO BECOME BETTER.

BECAUSE HERE'S THE TRUTH:  
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CAMP TEACHES MINDSET.  
AND EDUCATION + MINDSET WILL ALWAYS WIN.

WHEN YOUR CHILD IS OUT IN THE WOODS...  
STRUGGLING FORWARD ON A ROPES COURSE...  
LEADING A TEAM ON THE TRAIL...  
SOLVING REAL PROBLEMS IN REAL-TIME...  
ON A THEATER STAGE...  
THEY'RE LEARNING HOW TO SHOW UP IN LIFE.

THAT'S WHERE EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS BUILT.  
THAT'S WHERE GRIT GETS DEVELOPED.  
THAT'S WHERE LEADERS ARE MADE.

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NOT IN YOUR LIVING ROOM.  
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CALLED INTO RESPONSIBILITY.  
CALLED INTO CREATIVITY.  
CALLED INTO CONFIDENCE.

THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN IN THE SAFE ZONE.  
IT HAPPENS AT CAMPS.

WE DON'T RAISE SPECTATORS.  
WE DEVELOP ACTION-TAKERS.

WE DON'T WAIT FOR LIFE TO HAPPEN.  
WE PREPARE KIDS TO CREATE IT.

IF YOU WANT YOUR CHILD TO BREAK PATTERNS,  
BUILD DISCIPLINE, AND BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES...

THEN SEND THEM TO CAMP.  
NOT LATER. NOW.  
THIS IS THE SUMMER THEY GROW. DON'T MISS IT.

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## SUMMER CAMP PHOTOS:

### SUMMER CAMP PHOTOS: EMBRACING THE MYSTERY

*The advent of sharing photos from summer camp is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that is prompting camps across the country to grapple with brand-new questions. In this hyperconnected world, how do we begin to navigate the nuances of posting photos from camp? The right frequency, the right quantity, and which platforms to use are all mysteries to be solved— and it's not just camps adjusting to this new world.*

*As a parent, I've attempted to adapt appropriately too. I've been there—clicking the refresh button, hoping this was the moment that camp posts the next crop of images. When our children have been away from us for a few days, a week, a month—we are anxious to see a new picture to show their growth, their smiles, and their newfound friends.*

*But sometimes, and I include myself in this, we can be tempted to look too closely, seeking answers to mysteries that we ourselves create.*

#### The Case of the Crossed-Arm-Camper

*Years ago, a camp parent reached out to me, troubled by an image they had seen online. In a posted photo, they'd seen a group of boys huddled together in strategic conversation while waist-deep in water. Meanwhile, their boy stood on the periphery alone, stone-faced, with arms crossed. Lacking context, this sparked real concerns of*

*exclusion and isolation in his parents. Why was he alone? Why so serious? Had he done or said something hurtful? Had something hurtful been said to him? I headed down to the waterfront to investigate.*

*Gathering my swim staff for a brief conference, we were able to determine that what the camera had actually captured was a game of "Greasy Watermelon." The four boys together were strategizing how to move a large fruit (not pictured) from one end of the swim area to the other. The cross-armed boy in question was acting as his team's first line of defense should the watermelon's momentum happen to shift (as it may at any time in Greasy Watermelon). The photographer had captured him taking his duties very seriously.*

*What looked like isolation, was actually a real-time glimpse of camper-initiated teamwork, goalsetting, role-defining, responsibility, and FUN. I reached out to his parents that night and closed the case.*

#### Epilogue

For me, this example underscores the challenge of posting and interpreting images without context. Our fears as parents, separated from our children, can be exacerbated by this onedimensional communication and misinterpretation can prompt even the most well-

intentioned parent to needlessly intervene.

In his book, *Homesick and Happy*, child Psychologist Michael Thompson discusses the power of the summer camp experience, illustrating how children who are away from their parents can be both "homesick and happy, scared and successful, anxious and exuberant. When kids go to camp—for a week, a month, or the whole summer—they can experience some of the greatest maturation of their lives, and return more independent, strong, and healthy." Kids need to experience all these things because it is part of creating their autonomy, independence, and voice. They need the opportunity to explore through the entire experience, bug bites and all.

The reality at camp is that we want campers to be fully present and we attempt to document the summer in a way that is minimally intrusive. We would rather capture an unaware child absorbed in a book (or fiercely defending against out-of-frame watermelons) than create endless images of campers being asked to smile and pose for the camera. In this way, we feel we capture the essence of camp, and provide parents with the ability to enjoy an unscripted glimpse of joy or growth—and that's the version of camp we're genuinely excited to share with you.

**By Bryan Partridge, Camp Director, Lanakila Camp**

Where a boy learns to  
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# CAMP AGAWAM

Camp Agawam is a residential summer camp for boys. Since 1919, the values of sportsmanship, service to others, and stewardship of the natural world have been at the heart of the Agawam experience, which takes place each summer on a 165-acre campus on beautiful Crescent Lake in Raymond, Maine.



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incredible launching point for your entire life."*

*-Agawam Alum*



# THE IMPORTANCE of Camp

With children and adolescents battling anxiety and depression at a rate never seen before, parents and educators are searching desperately for ways to keep kids healthy and safe. Among their best strategies are spending time outdoors and making friends; getting off devices and avoiding social media; and being physically active. Summer camp, especially a multi-week, overnight experience, is a great place to do all of these. And though it can be difficult at home to break out of old habits and routines, children often thrive at summer camp. In a new environment – and a digital detox – children connect with nature, find confidence and resilience, and recharge their mental batteries.

An August 2020 Massachusetts General Hospital study identified social connection as the strongest protective factor for depression. Summer camp provides a unique environment for children to cultivate essential interpersonal skills. Campers are immersed in a diverse community where they share cabins, meals, and activities with peers from various backgrounds, ages, cultures, and perspectives. This exposure fosters empathy, understanding, and appreciation for differences. As they navigate this environment of varied personalities, they learn to adapt, communicate, and collaborate effectively. Through engagement in collective adventures—from hiking trips to late-night campfires, bonds and memories develop that transcend ordinary friendships. Whether conquering a ropes

course or performing a cabin skit, they learn to rely on one another, celebrate victories, and support each other during challenges. These skills extend far beyond camp life, enriching their social interactions in school, family, and beyond.

Summer camp also serves as a powerful arena for nurturing resilience and confidence in young people. At camp, children encounter new challenges, like sleeping under the stars or attempting a new water sport. These experiences encourage campers to step out of their comfort zones. When they take calculated risks and sometimes face setbacks, they learn that failure is a steppingstone, not an obstacle. The supportive environment allows them to dust themselves off, learn from mistakes, and try again. This resilience becomes a life skill that helps kids overcome challenges in school, relationships, and future endeavors. Camp provides a unique opportunity for children to survive without parental safety nets. Away from home, they learn to make decisions, manage their time, and solve problems independently. This newfound autonomy boosts their self-confidence and prepares them for life beyond camp.

Finally, a summer at camp provides a refreshing escape from the digital noise and constant connectivity of our modern lives. At camp, children step away from technology and immerse themselves in nature. There is time to notice the cries of the loons, the scent of pine, and the lapping of waves. This direct communion

with the natural world has a profound impact on mental health, reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of wonder and grounding. Without constant notifications or virtual comparisons, campers learn to be present in the moment, allowing their minds to recharge. They trade screens for face-to-face conversations. The absence of screens and distractions promotes mindfulness and allows campers to forge genuine connections.

Summer camp is a transformative experience that shapes children in profound ways. It allows for growth in interpersonal skills, where campers learn to communicate, collaborate, and appreciate diversity. Through shared adventures and calculated risks, campers build resilience; learning that perseverance, not praise, is the achievement. Moreover, camp provides a screen-free environment, allowing kids to connect with nature, reduce anxiety, and recharge their mental health. Many residential summer camps are multi-year allowing lessons learned to be internalized and transferable to situations and experiences in the months outside of camp. Summer camp isn't just about fun; it equips children with essential life skills, confidence, and a deeper appreciation for the world around them and in today's climate, that is more important than ever.

***Karen Malm is Director of Programs, Alumni Relations and Council Operations, and Assistant Camp Director at Camp Agawam***



# CAMP SETON



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# A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

## A Week of Scouting Camp Stirs A Child's Imagination Like None Other

Since its inception in 1912, the Greenwich Scouting program has held steadfast to its commitment to immerse youth in outdoor activities and camping experiences. For over a century, the program has made a significant impact on the lives of children and adolescents in our community. One of the key components of this lasting success has been Camp Seton. Established nearly 60 years ago, the camp has continued to provide an enriching and educational summer adventure for our youth, regardless of their Scouting background.

### A Summer Adventure at Camp

Nestled amidst the picturesque landscape of Greenwich, Connecticut, Camp Seton spans over 249 acres of pristine wilderness. With two Byram River-fed lakes at its heart, the camp offers a plethora of opportunities for children to engage in both traditional and innovative outdoor activities. From fishing and campfire cooking to swimming and boating, Camp Seton instills a love for nature and adventure in every camper.

### Developing Skills and Character

Camp Seton's diverse program offerings go beyond recreational activities. The camp is also dedicated to teaching Scout skills, handicrafts, archery, and marksmanship on the rifle range. Through these experiences, campers develop self-reliance, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving abilities that will serve them well throughout their lives. In addition to these essential life skills, Camp Seton offers specialized programs such as nature study, climbing tower, and hiking. These activities not only inspire curiosity and respect for the natural world but also foster an understanding of the environment and its importance to our collective wellbeing.

### The Impact of Camp Seton on Scouting and the Community

Camp Seton's role in the Greenwich Council Scouting program cannot be overstated. The camp provides a crucial space where young people can build friendships, gain valuable life experiences, and learn about themselves and the world around them. For many campers, the bonds formed during their time at Camp Seton last well beyond their Scouting years. Moreover, Camp Seton contributes to the overall enrichment of the Greenwich community. The camp provides an invaluable resource for local families seeking a safe, nurturing, and educational environment for their children during the summer months. It also serves as a hub for community gatherings, events, and volunteer opportunities, further strengthening the ties between Scouting and the town of Greenwich. As Lord Robert Baden-Powell, one of the founders of Scouting,

once said, "A week of camp life is worth six months of theoretical teaching in the meeting room." At Camp Seton, we see the truth of this statement in the transformative experiences of our campers. The memories, skills, and friendships they forge during their time at Camp Seton have a lasting impact not just on their own lives, but on the Greenwich community as a whole. For almost six decades, Camp Seton has provided a unique and unforgettable summer adventure for the youth of Greenwich. The camp's diverse range of activities and its commitment to fostering personal growth have made it an indispensable part of the Greenwich Council Scouting program. As we look towards the future, we remain dedicated to preserving the legacy of Camp Seton and continuing to offer these life-changing experiences for generations to come.



*Jim Heavey is the Scoutmaster of Greenwich Boy Scout Troop 35 and has led multiple Scouting expeditions. He has served as Greenwich Chief of Police since 2011.*



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# DO NOT PANIC. YOU CAN DO IT.



**Katie Byxbee**

“Alright guys we are here, let’s get ready,” said the driver of our van as we pulled into the gravel lot. My three friends and I along with our three counselors piled out of the van to meet our river guide. We were preparing to white water kayak down the Sacandaga River (The Soc) in upstate New York. This was my first summer in a white water kayak.

“I can hear it!” Said one kid. “So can I!” said another. I did not have my hearing aids in because I

knew I was going to be in the water, but not hearing the river made me even more excited to see it.

Our river guide, Frank, was a very experienced kayaker who has been on much more dangerous rivers than The Soc. He explained how the river would be four different parts; rapids, calm, rapids, then calm again. He made it sound straightforward and simple, however my mind went to the worst case scenario: wet exiting. A wet exit is when you flip over in a kayak and cannot roll back up, so you pull the skirt loop and push yourself away from the kayak, allowing you to come up for air.

I got excited every time at camp when I had to get out of the

water, however, we were not on Lake George anymore. The water was no longer deep and calm; the Soc was shallow and rocky. Frank and the other counselors reassured my camp mates and I that we are more than capable of paddling this river, otherwise we would not be here.

When choosing the order of the ducky line (the order in which the kayakers were to paddle in a line down the river), I felt best to be second in line right behind Frank in order to hear him as well as possible and for him to be able to reach me in case I flipped over and wet-exited my kayak. Once we went over safety rules, we all geared up and began to truck our kayaks down the river. With each step down to the water, my heartbeat felt like it was about to burst out of my chest. It was all I heard and all I felt. Because of my hearing loss, I tend to only hear

sounds that I choose to focus on. So when I finally saw the river, I focused my hearing on the sound of the water. And my heart beat seemed to have disappeared and overflowed with the white water crashing on rocks. The water was so much louder than I had anticipated; it sounded like white noises and static from the TV.

I tried to focus on getting into my kayak and making sure I had everything I needed. Once again, my heartbeat was the only thing I could hear even as I was floating in the eddie right before the river. (An eddie is a still spot of water in the rapids that is on the banks). It was time to make our way down the first rapid, and at this point my heartbeat felt like a drum in my chest. I told myself I needed to focus because this was no time to panic. I closed my eyes and took a breath, and focused on the water

*Continued on page 17*



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*Continued from page 2*

### Leadership Development

It is essential to give the CITs opportunities to lead. We cannot default to the oft repeated, “You are CITs. You are the leaders of camp.” Just because we say so, doesn’t mean the CITs have practice leading others. Give the CITs opportunities to develop a leadership style and perhaps arm them with a journal so they can track their leadership success and refine their style. Train staff to model for the CITs active listening skills, asking powerful and non-judgmental questions and role play with them. After leadership practices, also prioritize debriefing with them to discover what they have learned and how they can refine their leadership.

### Empower, Act, Thrive

These are essential active verbs that guide CIT successes. Help guide CITs to attaining reachable goals through goal setting exercises designed specifically for the camp season. Push them toward empowerment with powerful questions with role play and other confidence building activities. Encourage action by providing the safety to experience setbacks and challenge while still rebounding toward achieving the stated goals. Be sure to pause and debrief with CITs and they learn how to thrive experiencing success in their goal setting exercises. All of this builds confidence that they can cycle through with many aspects of their camp and outside lives.

CIT leaders must practice giving effective and continual feedback for the group to experience the development you wish. Be certain the feedback contains appropriate and specific praise and avoid fluff. Teach the CITs how to receive and act upon constructive feedback and incorporate the language and accountability you use and expect from counselor staff, so the CITs begin to ascend to the counselor expectations.

As we are busy hiring staff, managing camper and CIT enrollment, attending camp gatherings and so much more, take the time to evaluate your CIT program to ensure it is meeting the needs of today’s teenagers. The CIT summer experience, in essence, is your opportunity to begin training and shaping your future staff. The benefits of a strong, popular CIT program will have lasting benefits for the individual and the camp.

*Whit Ryan has more than 35 years of experience in camping. She has served as Director of Staff Recruitment and Leadership Training at Wyonegonic Camps in Maine. Previously, Whit was a senior staff member at Alford Lake Camp, ME and director of Waukeela Camp, NH. As a career educator and founder and owner of Clearview Life Coaching, Whit focuses on working with schools and individuals to build stronger citizens and communities. She has extensive experience in building leadership training programs that will produce lasting benefits for camps. Whit has presented at both ACA National and New England conferences. Whit can be reached at whit@clearview-lifecoaching.com or clearview-lifecoaching.com/.*

*This article originally appeared in the American Camping Association’s January 2025 newsletter. It is reprinted here with permission.*









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that was 100 feet in front of me. I went over everything I was just told: *sit up straight, paddle hard, if you flip over try to roll back up, do not panic.* Those words were repeated in my head over and over as we began to paddle to the rapids.

Before I knew it, I was there, in the waves, paddling as hard as I could. I took a quick glance to my right and see how fast the banks were moving, and that's when I realized it was me moving that fast. *Sit up straight.*

The waves got bigger and it got harder to paddle. *Paddle harder!*

Frank moves across the river over multiple waves, trying to avoid a rock that I would not have noticed without him. *If you flip, just roll back up.* A wave came over the bow of my boat, causing my kayak to tilt forward and bounce back up. I lost balance, struggling to brace back up, but I did it.

Right as I was stable again, a wave hit me from the other side. It took me by surprise, so I forgot to brace and I flipped.

*Do not panic.*

Somehow, the rapids were louder underwater. I had my eyes closed and all I could focus on was the insufferable sounds from the water that stressed me out on its own. The water began to fill my ears but instead of blocking noise, it consumed me. Don't panic, I told myself, focus.

I once again focused on my heartbeat, oddly not as loud as the rapids I was submerged in. I set up my paddle, positioned my hips, and rolled back up. Next thing I knew, I could see Frank in front of me and I was paddling again. That entire moment had been maybe a total of three seconds, but it was the longest three seconds I could ever imagine.

In that moment, I realized

focusing on my heartbeat allowed me to roll back up and drown out the overwhelming sounds from the rapids. So for the rest of the river, I focused on my heartbeat, and everything else came naturally. I did not flip again, I did not lose Frank, and I did not panic.

Once we reached the calm water, I took a deep breath. "Are you okay?" asked one kid.

"Yeah, I thought you were a goner! One second you were there, and then you weren't!" screamed my other friend.

I forgot how many people I was with when I was paddling down the river because all I focused on was my heartbeat. "We were screaming to you asking if you were okay," said the other camper.

"I'm okay," I told them all. "Just next time, remember I can't hear and focus on yourself so you do not flip like I did."

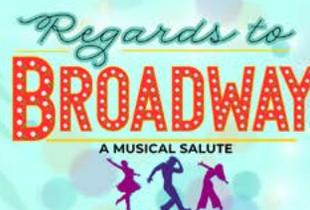
No one else flipped in the

second rapid, and everyone was locked in on themselves. Zoning in and focusing is the most important thing in order to progress. Once you realize that and find what works best for you, things will come naturally and work will become easier. Just remember to take a deep breath, relax, not panic, and focus.

**Kathryn Byxbee is known by all as Katie. She is an 11th grader at the Greenwich Country Day School. She loves all water sports, polo, kayaking and swimming. Katie is part of the YMCA Greenwich Aquatics Water Polo team and GCDS Boys Varsity Water Polo & Swim teams, but she finds most joy when paddling around in her kayak at Adirondack camp in the summer. Katie has moderate-severe sensorial hearing loss in both ears. Adirondack camp has been her home away from home every summer since 3rd grade.**



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# FIFTY YEARS

(continued from page 4)

*people who will actually understand it are other AMTers,” Emma (Camper 2024) writes.* Peter (Camper 1982) struggles for words, too: “Indescribable unless you spend time in the Maine woods with good people who you learn to trust.”

How, then, to convey the magic of AMT? *“It is the magic of discovery—coming around the corner and seeing a moose, a flower, an amazing view,” Cynthia (Camper 1980) writes. It’s “Almonds. Trail magic. A deep appreciation for nature. A deep connection to each other,” says Richard (Leader 2005). Three-time trip leader Annie (Leader, 2006, 2010, 2012) has the AMT magic down like a backcountry scrambled brownie recipe: “1 part stink, 1 part grit, and 1 part laughter.”*

The hardest moments aren’t always while hiking. Sometimes it’s getting into camp after dark, having to pitch tents, collect water, cook dinner, and hang food in the pouring rain. Inevitably, this is when the stoves give up the ghost, so the group settles for al dente quinoa. You’re relieved to finally get into your sleeping bag, but there’s a root jabbing into your side all night. You’re too tired to care. You wake up, put your wet and cold sports bra back on, and do it all over again. The simplicity in the daily pattern—wake up, walk, camp, repeat—does a number on campers’ capacities to persevere. *“A major lesson of AMT is that you just keep going, just keep putting one foot in front of the other,” Richard (Leader 2005) reflects.* The value of this resolve to accomplish what you set out to do is only mounting in a digital world that sets out numerous exit routes for attention. Without the option to reach for their phones, *campers learn to get comfortable being uncomfortable.*

Unplugged, in the woods, part of a small group for 7 weeks, true selves emerge, and it’s from this place that campers relate to one another. *“I was surprised by how much I did not miss my phone/social media/the internet. It was really easy to just read books and talk to people and let that be the*

*extent of my ‘social media,’” Maggie (Leader 2017) shares.* Without all the ‘real world’ distractions and creature comforts, climbing mountains and living in the woods becomes a laboratory for campers to observe their patterns and develop strategies for overcoming hardship and achieving goals. *“I think AMT was what pushed me to build routines that serve me and help clarify my priorities. Every day had a pattern and goals, and routines helped balance the unknown,” Alex (Camper 2014) reflects.*

Rachel (Camper 2010) says she still implements ‘packs off’ breaks in her life. When going after her ambitions, she allows herself moments to pause mid-climb and take stock.

*“I truly felt I had tapped into and found myself. I learned to believe in myself, that I was strong, both physically and mentally,” Melissa (Camper 2004) writes.*

*“I was a self-conscious, unsure teenager, and thriving in the woods for a summer gave me so much confidence. Specifically, it gave me confidence to handle and push through challenging times. I learned the importance of acknowledging my emotions, but also controlling them. I learned to stay positive and lean on others when I am struggling,” Thayer (Camper 2002) shares.*

AMT groups learn to coordinate and problem-solve as a unit. By summer’s end, as campers shift into leadership roles, the group becomes an interdependent, autonomous squad. The trip leaders, in turn, shift roles too, from hands-on teaching to hands-off observation, occasionally offering guidance, primarily there to ensure health and safety. This sort of autonomy wouldn’t be possible on a shorter backpacking trip.

AMTers weather difficulties and celebrate triumphs together. These are grounds for true, lasting friendships: *“I am only 15, but I have learned how rare it is to make friends where you can be totally yourself—all the gross, ugly, grumpy days and aspects about yourself included. I know*

*that, no matter how many years go by, I can always reconnect with my AMT friends and that is invaluable,” Charlotte (Camper 2024) writes.*

Jamey (Camper 1981), who went on AMT 42 years before Charlotte, reflects something similar: *“The thing that stands out the most for me, as I reflect, is the authenticity of the relationships I had with my group. For maybe the first time in my life, I was my true self with my friends. They saw me when I was dirty and tired and grumpy at the end of a long hike. They also saw me at my happiest. Falling over in fits of giggles after too much sugar, or singing at the top of my lungs on the top of a mountain. They saw all the parts of me and they loved me. To be seen and loved for all the parts of myself at the age of 14 was an amazing thing.”*

As the friendships grow, the laughter deepens, from quips to get up Katahdin to belly laughs in the Mahoosuc Notch. A repertoire of inside jokes flourish, usually a kind of absurdist comedy, founded on group member’s quirks, thru-hiking characters, and whatever else transpires in the Maine woods.

The effort gives way to an even greater joy than could be possible without it: *“On my first AMT (2006), we had a challenging slog up Bemis Mountain owing to some rainy and cool weather. But towards the end of the hike there are open rock slabs, and by the time we made it to them the sun had come out. We stopped to have lunch and dry out a bit, but soon we found the most amazing blueberry patches. We must have spent at least an hour up there eating as many blueberries as we possibly could. All the day’s challenges melted away in the sun and blueberry goodness!” Annie (Leader, 2006, 2010, 2012) retells.*

Singing is another way AMTers seek the joy. Having grown up singing in camp, ALCers have a penchant for breaking out into song on trail. *“I remember once hiking in a quiet forest with a lot of ferns and pine trees.*

*There was heavy mist. Someone started singing ‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight.’ Soon all the girls were singing and doing all the animal parts. It was pretty amazing and echoed through the woods,” Peter Barhydt (Camper, 1982) shares.*

Campers come to understand that if they live for the peaks, they’ll be miserable most of the time. Laughter and song become the ways campers enjoy the valleys, too.

As campers endure, even make light of, the harder moments, their reservoirs of inner resilience inch higher, so when they encounter adversity off the trail, in their lives, they have this stored body knowledge: I can do hard things. And with this knowledge comes an authentic sense of confidence—a confidence based on internal fortitude, rather than external regard—a rare currency for a 15-year-old. Without fail, the struggle gives way to a sense of accomplishment and the campers learn this too.

*Stephanie (Camper 1993) remembers “crossing over the state line from Maine to New Hampshire [as] pure joy.” AMT groups cross the border towards the end of the trip. 282 miles from Katahdin, the sign reads. “The significance of that hard earned accomplishment was personal and shared by this group of people that had become my family. Everyone was proud and united—it was overwhelming,”*

Stephanie’s brother, Garth (Camper 1987, Leader 1994) remembers, *“sunrise from the top of Sugarloaf—the clouds had settled in the valley below and the surrounding mountain peaks, including Bigelow, were poking through the clouds. It looked like fog over the ocean mist and rocks. It was truly magical.”* Other AMTers reflect on similar moments, where the whole world seems to stand still—they



can see where they’ve been and where they’re going—and they feel like real mountain climbers, like this is just what they do now.

Hand-in-hand, AMTers walk back into Alford Lake Camp at the end of the summer. Camp waits in silence. As the AMT group comes into view, so too do their bulging thighs, nicked, bitten, and streaked with dirt, which have carried them for 7 weeks and 300 miles. They throw their arms in the air, triumphant, having completed their hike. AMTers return to their families, friends, schools, and the rest of their lives, changed. The trip becomes an irreplaceable memory, stored in the muscles, pumping the refrain: *I can do hard things, I can do hard things.*

*By Emma DeCamp (AMT Camper, 2010; Leader, 2023)*

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