

# Camp Kidwell and OnPoint offer respite camp

By Gari Voss

Fifteen years ago, Camp Kidwell Director KJ Kelly began working with the children support services at Allegan and Van Buren County Community Mental Health to design a Respite Camp. The goal: give children an opportunity to spend a weekend at Camp Kidwell to enjoy the outdoors and learn a variety of life skills while allowing their parents some quiet time at home.

"This is one of the favorite programs we offer," explained Kelly. "Over the course of a year, we often see the kids month to month, or at least several times a year, rather than just once in the summer.

Therefore, the connections staff make with the kids are quite strong. Because of that stronger connection and more time with the kids, I feel like we make a larger impact on the kids. I know that many of the kiddos look forward to coming each month. Often coming to Respite is used as an incentive at home and in school with really good results most of the time, because the kids are eager to come spend the weekend with us."

The first weekend was in November 2015. With activities that matched the weather, about a dozen kids arrived on Friday evening. After an introduction to camp, the schedule and some games, it was lights out in the cabins. 8am was rise and shine with breakfast to follow. Saturday brought choices for inside and outside play, lunch and cabin time. Arts and crafts, games and dinner led to campfire, showers and lights out. Sunday found campers up at 8am for breakfast, games and lunch before packing up to head home.

Counselors at Allegan OnPoint and Van Buren County Community Mental Health work with the children and the camp staff to ensure that the kids have the best possible experience. A weekend averages 15-18 campers. Occasionally, there are 20-24 with the largest attendance being 30.

Tom Owens, who has been with Allegan OnPoint (CMH) for 20 years, shared that students have the choice to attend. "Camp gives the kids a change in their regular schedules and gives parents a break. Some of the students really enjoy the time that is different than home."

Tara Poore, Program



Manager of Children Services at Allegan OnPoint, explained, "I was not here at its conception, but the purpose it serves is to give our kiddos access to the social / emotional connection with staff and to learn life skills and experience outdoor activities while having fun. Sometimes, the kids who have troubles being away from home and their parents have some anxiety. So camp is just a mini getaway; a couple nights to practice skills while getting a break from home and giving their parents a break."

Camp Kidwell's Program Director Dawn Brown utilizes summer staff to organize the activities and engage the campers. The fall offers time in nature, the winter often allows for outdoor time with sledding and snow games, and spring brings new discoveries.

"Kids have opportunities to create snacks like Valentine cupcakes or St. Patty's cookies. Some of the campers volunteer to assist with clean up by washing dishes, putting away supplies or cleaning up tables and counters," explained Kelly.

Poore interjected, "I know that our kids look forward to the weekends. It is a huge experience. The kids have fun in their treatment goals. Attending camp and socializing with peers are embedded in their Family or Individual Plan of Service. It is a fun way to attain some of their skills."

OnPoint has traditionally served only severe or persistent clients that are reimbursable with Medicaid. But OnPoint has expanded assistance at all levels of need, so Respite Camp is open to young clients with respite goals. Because of the expansion to meet additional levels of need, clients can receive services for a longer period of time.

Respite Camp is offered once a month from September to May, excluding December and January. The beauty is that not long after Respite Camp takes a break until fall, summer camps begin. The beauty is that Respite Campers can return to camp for a week-long experience that adds water activities, horseback riding, sports like soccer or archery, and

other activities like the beloved campfire and S-mores.

"It is fantastic that the kids experience being in nature and off screens. In the summer, they are able to experience the lake with kayaking, swimming, fishing and other activities," added Poore. "They develop teamwork skills and individual growth."

Looking back over the years of Respite Camp, Kelly gives credit to the Camp Kidwell and Community Mental Health staffs. "I am thankful to the counselors from Allegan OnPoint and Van Buren CMH. The counselors share stories of the kids learning skills, gaining confidence, opening up, and growing as individuals because of their experiences at camp," Kelly reflects.

Kelly continued, "We are definitely grateful for the opportunity to welcome more kiddos to camp, especially those who need the experience so badly. OnPoint and all the other groups we work

with have been terrific partners and supporters in helping make that happen!"

Anyone interested in Camp Kidwell Respite

Camp and/or Summer Camp can contact Tara Poore at OnPoint (269) 673-6617 or KJ Kelly at 269 521-3559.

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