

THE FIELD REPORT

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HEALING WOUNDED HEARTS

SUMMER CAMP GIVES GOLD STAR CHILDREN A CHANCE TO BE THEMSELVES



“We help give these kids a chance to be around other children who are like them, who understand them automatically and also to bring them healing and to teach them resiliency”

April 27, 2018 | By Chris Bucher

One of Deb Paschke’s favorite parts of her job is welcoming the ear-to-ear grins from those who are about to have the best week of their lives.

Paschke is one of the first people the dozens of children and teenagers see when they land and get off the plane in Milwaukee every summer. The smiles on their faces rarely leave for the next week as they immerse themselves in a weeklong summer camp.

But this isn’t your average summer camp. This is Camp Hometown Heroes, where campers share at least one thing in common: They’re the children and siblings of fallen military soldiers.

Camp Hometown Heroes was founded and is operated by Hometown Heroes, a nonprofit that started by helping families in need in communities. The camp began in June 2013 when co-founders Jim Kacmarcik and Neil Willenson looked for a way to give children who lost their own personal hero a way to have fun while being surrounded by those who share similar experiences.

“There’s so much done for the Gold Star families, but somehow the kids get overlooked a little bit,” Paschke, the camp’s Director of Outreach, said. “We knew what they needed was to be around others who understand exactly how they feel.”

The camp has grown continuously over the years and has attracted youth from 35 states. The campers fly to Milwaukee through Delta Air Lines, which handles the travel, waiving fees and providing manpower. Campers are greeted at the airport by camp staff and volunteers.

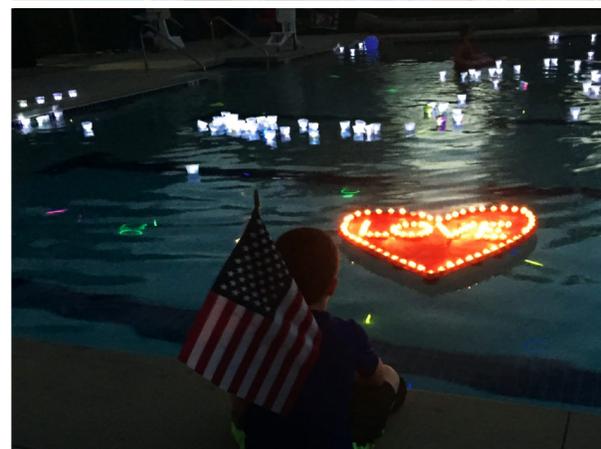
“When they get off the plane and we get to see them, they’re so excited to see each other,” Paschke said. “We change these kids’ lives, their hearts and give them a brighter path for their future. It’s very emotional; it’s a roller-coaster week. There are huge highs and some huge lows.”

Activities during the week include archery, summiting an alpine climbing tower, kayaking, fishing, arts and crafts and much more. In addition to the typical summer camp outdoors activities, Camp Hometown Heroes offers grief counseling sessions for the campers.

“We help give these kids a chance to be around other children who are like them, who understand them automatically and also to bring them healing and to teach them resiliency,” Paschke said. “They learn ways to move forward in their lives when they go home and they can share that with their families.”

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This summer, the camp anticipates bringing in about 200 kids for two one-week sessions, including a counseling program where campers get an opportunity to speak to one another about their experience losing a very special person in their lives.

The response from children who participate in Camp Hometown Heroes has been appreciative. Not only for offering a fun-filled week of activities, but also because the camp provides the Gold Star children an outlet to be themselves.

“Camp made me into the person I am today,” one camper wrote in feedback provided to the camp. “I came to camp five years ago as an angry, distant and emotionally distraught 13-year old. Camp gave me a place where I could finally be myself, a place where I could make lifelong friends and a place I could be a kid for once.

“This camp took that scared and angry girl and molded me into a loving, compassionate person that I am today.”

Another camper said that the emotions that took over for years after receiving the life-changing news became easier to deal with because of Camp Hometown Heroes.

“Camp gave me the realization that I will no longer feel lonely

in my sadness and that I am not the only one in this world who feels the way I do,” the camper wrote. “Also, I no longer feel like grief is a bad thing.”

Camp Hometown Heroes relies predominantly on volunteer counselors, some who were campers themselves and can understand what those in their cabins might be going through. It’s partly funded for by donations received through Grand Slam Charity Jam, an annual fundraiser in Milwaukee. The fundraising effort typically raises more than \$100,000 every year and has netted more than \$1 million since it started.

The camp will continue running for the foreseeable future, too, with the nonprofit recently signing a 15-year lease on a facility just outside Milwaukee.

“These children are so inspirational,” Paschke said. “Their families are so inspirational; they’re so grateful for what we’re able to do for their children and how we’re able to change their lives. We’re able to give them an outlet. I’m just the luckiest person in the world to have this job and to be around these children, it’s incredible.”