



Oh, how I miss the youth campers filling the campfire circle on a balmy summer night to perform cabin skits, chant, and sing those crazy camp songs. I pass the fire circle each evening, and there is a stack of firewood off to the side of the fire pit, just waiting for the first group of campers to return to camp after COVID.

I remember distinctly my first family camp experience. I was in first grade and my parents took us to Pilgrim Pines Camp in Oak Glen. Although the camp was only 15 miles from home, it felt as if we had traveled to another world. The moment I stepped out of the car and saw the gigantic spreading oaks, the goats in the field running freely about, and the woodsy theme of the camp structures, I felt like I had been transported to paradise.

It was the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, and many friends from church were joining together for family camp. I clearly remember a few of the activities that weekend. I learned to make jelly from the red pear of the beavertail cactus. I dyed a bandana ruby red by boiling beets over the campfire and stirring my scarf in the hot beet water. I peeled processed acorns so the cooks could make acorn-bread after pulverizing the nuts. The taste of the acorn bread did not taste sweet and yummy like mom's cornbread, but with enough butter and jelly smeared on top, and a big gulp of milk to wash it down, it was passable. I still have the wooden loom I was given in arts and crafts that weekend. I found it a few years ago with the half-made scarf still on it. Maybe someday I will finish that project! I know I cried all the way home after that weekend. I didn't want camp to end. For me, there was something very magical about singing around the campfire, hiking to the peak, feeding the goats, making new friends, exploring the camp wilderness with my siblings, and watching a cascade of shooting stars from the cabin deck. I just did not want the magic to end. "Couldn't we all just move to camp to live FOREVER?" I begged.

I know the feeling that captured my heart so many years ago has also captured the hearts of generations of youth campers at de Benneville Pines. Summer after summer I witness nervous parents dropping off their children for their first camp experience, and a week later, picking up their kids who proclaim they want to live at camp FOREVER. Oh, how I relate when I hear those words and see those big tears. What is it about camp that captures a child's imagination and opens their heart to the possibilities of the world? I think the answer might almost be universal: *Camp provides youth and families with a heartfelt connection. Best friendships are made at camp.*

The value of a week of youth camp can be hard for campers to articulate. They just know it feels good to spend time at camp, and they don't want the magic to end! It takes months of planning programs, hours of counselor training, and hundreds of hours of volunteer time for the magical transformation to happen. And it takes the skill of a Camping Ministries Director to coordinate it all.

For the past five years, Geoff Anderla has steadfastly served as our Camping Ministries Director, first as an employee of the PSWD and then as a Camp employee. He has worked year-round developing deans, volunteers, and youth staff to create, design, and implement programming for our youth and families. Geoff approaches every idea and decision based on UU values, striving to make sure every camper knows they are loved and respected. I recall Geoff serving daily on the food line so he could greet each camper with a smile—offering supportive words with great warmth and calling the campers by name.

Geoff is cycling out of his role as our Camping Ministries Director and embracing his other full-time job at a non-profit organization. His dedication to service to others is a driving force in his life, inspiring all who know him. While we will miss Geoff being at youth and family camps, we know that we will see him at other retreats—after all, his heart is with Camp.



Geoff was pivotal in selecting his successor, Marianne Swift-Gifford. After six months of cross-training, Geoff is confident Marianne has what it takes to carry on the tradition of coordinating outstanding camps! I hope you will join me in saying a heartfelt thank you to Geoff for all that he has done for the camping ministry program and in welcoming Marianne Swift-Gifford into her new role, [cm@uucamp.org](mailto:cm@uucamp.org). *Camp touches lives because good people give of their time and talents and invest in our children.*

**-We place value in people.** Through the camp experience, young people learn to understand the strength of humankind. They find their inner strength, and they see strength and courage in others. We demonstrate that value through respect, honesty, caring, and sharing.

**-We place value in the natural world.** For UU's this comes to us through the 7<sup>th</sup> principle; and campers explore the interconnected web of all existence while at camp. They learn how we are all interconnected with the earth and its nature, as well as with one another.

**-We place value in a sense of contribution.** Youth learn what it means to make a difference while at camp. They go outside of themselves and encourage the success of others. By working together on a team project, young people develop a sense of how their collective efforts can affect change in the world.