

Camp Agape First Hand

On a crisp morning just north of Eugene while the sun is still trying to peek through the tops of the trees children are sitting quietly and journaling in a family group setting, reflecting on the messages shared by their cabin leaders. As I watch the group, I see some of the older children helping their younger bunk mates fill in their journals and encouraging them to think of how the topic at hand means something to them.

Camp Agape is a camp that was founded in Hawaii by a group of dedicated men and women who work with incarcerated individuals. During their work, they came to realize the great neglect the families of such individuals face. With the leadership of Pastor Roy Yamamoto they created a camp tailored to the hearts and needs of children who have parents in prison.

In 2011, DOC's 2013 Volunteer of the year and one of OSP's Religious Services dedicated volunteers, Andy Papendieck and his wife Heather took a few of his friends to witness Camp Agape Hawaii first hand. They caught the bug and in 2012 Papendieck and his team opened Camp Agape Oregon welcoming over 100 children.

I was honored to witness this camp first hand on Friday, August 22nd and I walked away proud to know the men and women who make this camp happen. There are 170 dedicated staff for 150 children, the staff range in age from 60 to college age. Despite the age of the staff they are all having fun and are focused one thing, making sure the child in their care is smiling the whole time.

Granted a number of the children coming to camp come from homes where it is hard to smile all the time, most of them are raised in tough environments. Camp Agape offers them a 4 day bliss and escape from that, a place and space where campers are surrounded by love and acceptance for who they are. Instead of the regular camp style of separating children into bunks of like ages, Camp Agape splits their cabins into groups of all ages. The idea is to give the children an opportunity to feel like a functioning family, where the children learn to work as a unit despite the age differences. Hence the reason they call it a cabin rather than a bunk.

Campers are encouraged to display their creative talents in a variety of outlets, be it arts and crafts, evening sing along, sports, rope courses, archery, horseback riding, and presentations in front of the camp.

What struck me the most was the dedication the staff had to each of the campers. People put their lives on hold, their families' lives on hold so that they can be there to care for these children. The care giving is genuine, the wait staff and the cabin leaders are mothers and grandparents of their own children. They are all volunteers who have chosen to partake in such a camp and their concern and devotion to children whose parents are behind bars, is readily apparent in their interactions with the children. There is nonstop encouragement and love showered on the children, as they walk into the dining are, as they sit and talk, play or jump the children are treated as celebrities by these incredible staff. Many people would say "I'm too old for this; I'm too old to deal with adolescent issues and petty complaints that

children of this age have". However, I never heard that, all I heard was the compassion the staff had for these children and their families.

Nothing melts the heart faster than watching a child lean their head on a staff member's shoulder for comfort or a child run and give another staff member a hug. Witnessing all of this you see that human beings can transcend the boundaries we create around ourselves, we see that we can truly be there for another. After 100 years it won't matter what kind of car you drove or how much money you have in your bank account; what's going to matter most is that you made a difference in the life of a child. The staff, volunteers, and donors of Camp Agape can proudly say they have made a difference in the life of many children!

Camp Agape is free to all who participate, besides for providing a free scholarship to all the children, they also send them home with t-shirts, pillows, a sleeping bag and school supplies. Agape Youth was born as an outcome of Camp Agape. Agape Youth is an after school program which runs all year and focuses on keeping the children involved throughout the year. Most of the children participating in the Agape program are children of fathers who are housed here at OSP. The Agape staff and volunteers have provided a much-needed bridge between the limited amounts of care a father or mother can do for their children while locked up and attending to the child's needs their parents can't give them while they are away.

All of this is volunteer work, all of this is funded by donations obtained from the communities that feel and care about these children. OSP has held its own fundraiser in support of Camp Agape. The Activities department at OSP held a fundraiser and raised \$3500. Costing a little over \$300 per child to attend camp agape, the men at OSP were able to sponsor 11 children's scholarship to camp this year.

If you would like to learn more please visit www.campagapeoregon.com

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