

“A Volunteer’s Life Changing Story About Camp”



Evan Ernst, a senior at Florida State University, has spent the last four summers volunteering as a staff member at Camp Boggy Creek. He first learned about the opportunity through his fraternity, Phi Kappa Tau, the same organization in which Paul Newman belonged during his college years. We wanted to learn about what motivated Evan to get involved, how his experience has affected him and some moving stories that he says will stay with him forever.

What made you decide to volunteer?

My life-long friend and high school teammate, Rafe Maccarone, died of Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, a form of sudden cardiac arrest, during a school soccer practice. Rafe inspired me to use tragedy as a trajectory to save lives. I wanted to inspire the kids who needed it most. I saw an opportunity for my fraternity to make a serious impact and was blessed to find a way.

Were you nervous when you first showed up at camp?

Absolutely. The staff did an incredible job during orientation to get me ready. By the end, I felt very inspired and well prepared. But I was still nervous. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to memorize all the cheers and dances. For the most part, to be completely honest, that first week I didn’t know them. I soon realized that it didn’t matter. All that matters is that you’re willing to go all in for the kids. And yes, I eventually learned them and cheered and danced.

How do you hope your experience working with the kids made a difference for them?

My goal with campers is always the same. I invest everything I have into making sure they have the best week of their lives. I strive to inspire the kids to look past their trials and tribulations and see their true potential. My hope is that I am able to give them some tools to be successful in the real world.

What one moment about camp will stick with you forever?

I will never be able to forget the unbelievable bond a simple shower cap formed. A camper named Cade, who was battling brain cancer and just a week prior had brain surgery. He was unable to participate in a lot of the same activities as the other campers unless he was wearing a shower cap. This made Cade feel self-conscious as a result. Knowing this, Cade’s entire cabin made a decision that floored me. They decided that if Cade had to wear a shower cap, they all would, too. It was a remarkable show of love and unity by these young kids. The spirit soon rippled through camp. By the end of the week, we had gone through over 1,500 shower caps, because every time Cade wore a shower cap so did every single person at camp.

Was there a child that stands out from your experiences as a camp volunteer?

In the local gym, Cocoa Beach Health and Fitness, hangs a photograph of Brian Johnson, one of my best friends growing up. I call him Cocoa Beach's Pride and Joy. Brian played college baseball for the University of Florida and is now a pro with the Boston Red Sox organization. The picture is of Brian during college sliding into second base during a big game. I had never seen the picture before, but remembered immediately where it was from and the story behind it.

Before the College World Series, during my first week of volunteering at Camp Boggy Creek, Sam, a camper in my cabin during heart week, happened to be a big University of Florida Gator baseball fan. He knew every statistic about his favorite player, who just so happened to be the Gator's star left-handed pitcher, Brian Johnson.

So with camp's approval, Sam and I called Brian together before his big game. Brian told Sam to make sure he watches his first at bat in the College World Series, because it was going to be for him. Sam was so overcome by joy and excitement that he could hardly restrain his emotions. He talked about it the entire week.

Brian got a hit with the at bat, a double in fact – the captured moment that hangs on the gym wall.

I wondered if the camper even saw the miraculous hit that was dedicated to him. The next summer at camp, I saw the camper's bus pull up and the very first thing he said to me was "Evan did you see the hit? How's my friend Brian!?" I could barely believe it. The next year, as he stepped off the bus, it was, "Evan remember the hit, how's my friend Brian!?" once again.

Over two years had gone by, and this moment was something the camper still talked about every single day at camp. I'll never forget how one act of kindness gave him hope and who knows, maybe even changed his life.

What advice would you give to anyone who wants to volunteer at Camp Boggy Creek?

Do it as soon as you can! I always tell people that through volunteering at camp they will change someone else's life for the better. But I also want them to know that it's their lives that will be changed for the better, too. A big part of the person I am today is credited to the incredible people of Camp Boggy Creek.

Evan Ernst is a senior at Florida State University, where he triple majors in Entrepreneurship, Business Management and Marketing. In honor of his beloved friend Rafe Maccarone, Evan and his friends founded www.WhoWePlayFor.org, a non-profit organization dedicated to fighting Sudden Cardiac Arrest and promoting heart health.