

Summer camp partners help make Muskoka kids' dreams come true

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MUSKOKA – Since 2011, Muskoka Community Services has been making dreams come true by sending local children from low-income families to summer camps across Muskoka. The initiative has supported over 1200 kids with both overnight and day options, many who have attended overnight camp for the first time.

The summer camp funding program is always a hit with both parents and kids. Kids love to go to camp and parents are grateful for the opportunity to send their child for a life-changing experience.

One of the premises of the program is self-selection. While Muskoka Community Services funds a week of camp, families are tasked with finding a camp that suits their child's interests and needs, and liaising with the camp to ensure the week is magical. That means kids have attended music camps, sports camps, bible camps, dance camps, outdoor camps, canoe-tripping camps, arts camps, theatre camps, gymnastic camps, horseback-riding camps, special needs camps and more.

According to camp surveys conducted each year, campers' favourite parts of camp include making new friends, singing around campfires, playing in the mud, mountain biking, canoeing, swimming, trying the low ropes course, the zip line, learning new games, making crafts, meals and the tuck shop:

"For me the best thing about summer camp was that I tried new things and everyone encouraged me too. I would love to go again," said one camper.

"It was my first time horseback riding and the aerial park was great. I loved it all. Without your help, my mom wouldn't have been able to send me. So thank you," said another.

"I really enjoyed swimming a lot. Also I enjoyed the food, water games, songs, campfires and many other activities. Yet, I do wish there was more time for me to read my book," commented a third.

"The fireworks was my favourite part of camp because they went for a long time and also because I went to camp on the first of July I didn't get to have fireworks at home. I also liked the food as it was sooper good. Thanks for sending me," added a fourth.

Parents, when asked, most often say their child gained confidence from their week at summer camp and came home with experiences to share and memories to cherish:

"My son learned responsibility and independence – both things that have made this school year easier," said one parent.

"The best thing about camp for my child was that he was able to attend like his peers and not feel excluded again," said a second.

"The chance to go to summer camp for my daughter gave her a life experience that she wouldn't have gotten anywhere else," commented a third.

"The best part of summer camp for my son was him feeling like he fit in and getting to hang out with peers. It was a very positive experience," said a fourth.

"Summer camp allowed my child to realize he isn't the only child with Autism," added a fifth.

"Over the past six years Muskoka Community Services has worked with over 40 different local camps. We've been touched by the generosity of the many summer camps in Muskoka who have offered deep discounts and special programming, thereby allowing us to fund more children each year," said Rick Williams, district commissioner of community services.

This summer, kids accessing the funding program are attending 17 different local camps, all of which have been partners in previous years. But kids are not limited to these camps. If a family requests a camp we haven't utilized before, we work with that camp to ensure they meet provincial guidelines.

According to Brad Hamacher, program director at Great Moose Adventures, "Great Moose Adventures is thrilled to partner with the district on this important initiative. The summer camp experience is the ultimate opportunity for children to meet new lifelong friends, gain self-confidence and make a positive connection with the natural world – all the while having fun. Thanks to the district, and the province, this life changing experience is available for everyone."

Local summer camps have stepped up to help in other ways as well. In the past, Ryde Lake Girls Camp offered unfilled spaces free of charge. Camp Muskoka supported the district's Go Fund Me campaign, which raises funds for children over the age of 13 who are not funded by provincial dollars. New this year, some camps have begun to donate their lost and found items which are sorted and washed by volunteers, then sold at low cost to the families who utilize The Nest. Camp Ramah asked each of their campers to pack an extra pair pants which have been donated to the Nest, and are working with their older campers to deliver summer programming for residents at the Pines.

"Summer camps are terrific – and natural – partners for Muskoka Community Services. It's exciting to think we are still finding new ways to work together to better support our community," said Williams.



At Great Moose Adventures campers learn about teamwork.