

Camp Confidence

FSU campers live as leaders

By Lindsay Downey, associate editor

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Ah, summer camp. Canoeing on a sparkling lake, roasting marshmallows on the campfire, and making friends you'll never forget. Most campers dread packing up and leaving their camp adventures behind, but they return home with souvenirs and pictures to cherish forever. Others, however, decide they're simply not ready to say "sayonara" to their summertime siblings. When the first year of **Florida State University's** Reservation Leaders in Training Camp came to a close nine years ago, happy campers Laura Coburn and Josh Leavy knew they'd be back for another round of ghost-story telling and water-skiing fun. But, they didn't know they'd return each and every summer, or just how much the traditional-meets-training camp would help them grow as leaders.

After their first summer hiking and kayaking as young campers, both Coburn and Leavy returned for a second season under the tents of leadership—this time, being handed the campfire torch as Leaders in Training, or LITs. They were the first to dive in as the LIT empowerment program began. LIT campers are in at least the ninth grade and walk both sides of the leadership trail, serving double duty as counselor trainees and mentors. They spend one week on the 73-acre lakefront reservation shadowing college-age camp counselors and learning how to assert themselves among younger campers in the wild.

After training, LITs demonstrate their adeptness as they guide the younger campers through group games and nature hikes. "The first week is when they learn how to do things and they learn leadership," says Lee Murphy, camp director. "The second week is the teach-back, which improves their skills by getting to work as a team."

Coburn says her LIT training was invaluable in helping her grow as a leader. "We paired up with a counselor, and they pretty much took us under their wing. Most of us were very fortunate to have very strong leaders as counselors," she says of her LIT training. "I just remember soaking up their leadership skills."

From LITs, the two campers blossomed into seasoned water-ski instructors, a role they've held at the camp for the past five

years—and say they don't want to quit anytime soon. "Every year, I say I'm going to grow up and get a real job," Coburn says. "I'll have to do that eventually." Though most summer camps take the occasional canoe ride, the Reservation opens the nautical sails even further, teaching leadership on the lake through sports like canoeing and water skiing. "Most of the kids that haven't been here before, it's their first time skiing, and they need a little encouragement," Leavy says. "A lot of them are nervous when they go out on the boat for the first time, but once they get in the water, it's all over."



Fun In the Sun: FSU campers and counselors run Baywatch-style to practice rescue techniques. They master water safety skills through swimming, canoeing, and water skiing.

The Reservation is similar to adventure-style camps and provides students with the opportunity to learn leadership using the great outdoors. "I think camp is important for kids, especially nowadays, to get away from the video games and television," Murphy says. "A lot of day camps go to the pool or the mall. We don't do any of those things. We stay out on the lake and do more traditional camp things." From kayaking to exploring, campers use Mother Nature as their ultimate tour guide. "The reservation has many fun activities to offer, and it teaches a whole lot of skills that kids now don't always learn automatically," says leadership training counselor Megan Brown.

Campers say they love the 40-foot ropes-challenge course, though many of them were wary of the activity when they saw just how high up they'd be. "Some of them were a little bit uneasy when we first started," Brown says. She and the other counselors offered gentle encouragement to ease

campers' fears. "Mostly, we just told them it was their choice if they wanted to do it or not. We were hanging out up there to help walk them through it," she says. "None of them wanted to quit. Once they started getting comfortable with the equipment, they breezed through it." Camper Ann Dietrich, 14, says she had a blast on the challenge course and it helped boost her self-esteem. "It was really exciting," she says. "They actually let us do it on our own, so we had to trust ourselves."

From hiking to swimming, everyone has a favorite camp activity and for Brown, it's canoeing—especially on one particularly scorching Florida day. "We goofed around all morning, like three hours, just flipping the canoes over and rescuing each other," she says. "I really saw the group come together on that. It looked like they all had a blast, and I know I laughed really hard all morning." No matter how much fun ensues during camp, every activity lends itself to

leadership. As they get crazy with canoes, campers learn how to take charge in emergency situations and practice safety techniques. "We do traditional canoeing and we practice our t-rescues and basic strokes," says Ben Brunckhorst, leadership training counselor.

After learning and developing their skills throughout the week, campers let out summer steam with Fun Fabulous Friday. The festivities all have different themes, and during week three, it was "Wet, Wild, and Wacky." The fun centered on a rubber chicken, which added goofiness to otherwise routine games of capture the chicken. "If it was a tennis ball, I don't think it would go so well, but since it's a rubber chicken, it's the best thing to ever happen to them," Brunckhorst says. "They'll sprint and dive to get it. They think that rubber chicken is worth a thousand dollars." Brunckhorst saw the wacky event as an opportunity for LITs to step up to the plate. "That day, I let the

LITs take more of the leadership path,” he says. “I had the LITs take charge of a few games, kind of teach them, because that’s what we’re building them up to do—to be independent.”

Watching their independence grow like the flames on a campfire is something Murphy says makes it all worthwhile. “They come in maybe a little shy or reserved, but when they leave, they know the ins and the outs of the camp,” he says. “Maybe they weren’t the best sailors, but by the time they leave, they’re leading a sail class.”

Brunckhorst says campers come out of their shell more each day, and he witnessed that on a large scale when only about three campers out of 22 were lending their voices during a camp sing-a-long one Monday afternoon. By Thursday, though, they had made a complete turnaround. Almost every camper in the group was hitting the notes and belting out the tunes. “All of them were doing hand motions and dancing in front of the camp,” Brunckhorst says. “I know when I was their age, singing was one of those things I didn’t want to do, so to see that transformation is kind of gratifying because it does show perfectly that they feel a lot more comfortable, a lot more confident.”

During the summer, two LITs made the ultimate transformation from campers to camp leaders. Counselors noticed Dietrich’s infectious energy as a camper, and her enthusiasm only aided her ability to excite the group as an LIT. “Anne’s job is to motivate and reinforce the counselors,” Brunckhorst says. “She’s basically a super camper with limited powers of discipline.”

Dietrich’s maturity and responsibility as a leader blossomed over the summer. “She pretty much had the ability to talk the whole group into doing something,” Brown says. “She’s a leading force for LITs.” Dietrich says she learned how hard it is to get a group of young campers focused and ready to go. “It’s hard to keep the team together and to keep everyone working together and on the same page,” she says. “We played an amoeba-tag game where everyone had to get in a big line and we had to keep together. That was really tough because everyone was going in different directions.”

Dietrich could follow in the footsteps of Coburn and Leavy, who evolved from campers to LITs to long-term teachers at the camp. “I think that my leadership skills here have greatly improved. The counselors did an awesome job

teaching us team-building skills,” she says. “I’d really like to do something here again.”

While 14-year-old Stefan Kuhns’ leadership style was slightly different than Dietrich’s, he was just as effective in mentoring and motivating campers. “When I first met Stefan, he was relatively shy,” Brunckhorst says. “As an LIT, he started to flourish. He’s a good role model, and he just became stronger as a leader.” Brown says she saw the LIT as a modest but effective leader. “He doesn’t act like he’s the boss but just leads by example,” she says.

Kuhn attended travel camp one week, which gives curious campers the opportunity to traverse new terrain. Campers and counselors visit different Florida rivers and springs for a fun exploration of boosting self-sufficiency. “I like going different places and getting a new scene,” Kuhns says. “I learned how to use more materials and tools, and instead of just the basics, we got more in-depth.”

LITs weren’t the only ones whose leadership skills increased with every bug bite and tan line. The camp’s counselors are mentored by Murphy, who teaches them how to lead a group of young campers while training the LITs and serving as role models. “Because I’m the adult, I want the LITs to kind of tailor to my leadership style,” Brunckhorst says. “I taught them to

be flexible and listen to the other counselors. I didn’t so much give them rules—I gave them guidelines.”

For college students, learning how to deal with younger students can present interesting challenges. At any moment, new situations can be cropping up all over camp, and counselors have to be on their toes to make sure things don’t get out of hand. “You think that all I’m doing is babysitting while they play, but it’s a lot more tense on the brain than you would think,” Brunckhorst says. “You’re always thinking in terms of consequence or risk.” The teamwork between Brown and Brunckhorst, the camp’s two leadership counselors, can make or break the group. “As long as Ben and I always communicate, we don’t really have a problem,” Brown says. “This is probably the first time in a long time either of us have been with kids that age. It’s helping me a lot to know how to react toward them and how to win their approval, but at the same time get their respect.”

The number one thing counselors can do to gain respect and trust among campers is to be an exemplary role model in everything that they do. “If campers don’t see you putting on sunscreen, they forget to put it on,” Brown says. “You can’t really say anything if your face is scorched up too. I

try to be that model person who takes care of myself.” Both counselors work hard to perfect their leadership styles. “You realize there’s 100 different ways of being a leader,” Brunckhorst says. “Last week, I was training people so I was more authoritative—I was more rigid with my rules. This week, I like to think I’m the older brother that you don’t really see very often.”

Leading the group is about creating a balance between being a commanding counselor and a camp confidant. Brunckhorst combats chaos while leading campers through goofy games. He’s done plenty of belly flops into the lake and works hard to make the campers laugh and have a good time. “I’m protective of them, but I can just get down and play really hard. Doing this type of leadership, they really respect you if you can get out and play with them,” he says. “They get comfort out of Megan and I making fools of ourselves as much as possible. I’m not any less lax on the rules—I’m just more about having fun.”

For more information on Florida State University’s Reservation in Leaders Training Camp, visit <http://fsu.campusrec.com/reservation/litcamp04.html>. Contact Murphy at flmurphy@admin.fsu.edu.

Lake-side Leaders: Campers (clockwise from left) Joshy Leavy, Laura Coburn, Stefan Kuhns, Ben Brunckhorst, Megan Brown, and Ann Dietrich get a boost of confidence through team-building challenges.



PHOTO BY RYAN SLEE