

## RELIGION

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## Camping with a mission

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When Zionsville resident Don Schafer signed on as executive director of Camptown, a not-for-profit organization that provides faith-based Christian wilderness adventure youth programming, he wasn't sure if the job was the right for him.

Schafer had volunteered with the organization for about three years before he was asked to take the helm after the death of the program's founder, Tom Lehman, last year.

"When this came up, I wasn't really looking for a job," he said.

Although Schafer had done volunteer work with the organization, his background was in property management. But after a while, he said it became clear that it was what he was meant to do.

"I had so many people ask me 'have you ever thought about doing anything for Camptown?'" he said.

When he signed on, he brought with him a family of volunteers. His wife, Cynthia, is something of a jack-of-all-trades for the group.

"She is our primary grant writer, researcher, nurse and advisor, among thousands of other things she does for us," Schafer said.

Their children, Matt, Becca and Stephen, contribute, too, doing everything from helping with fund-raisers to taking inventory of Camptown gear on the weekends.

Camptown is an easy fit for the family of five, which regularly takes camping trips together.

"Cynthia and I have camped with the kids since Becca was 5 months old," he said.

Instilling a sense of family and community in campers is one of Camptown's goals, Schafer said. The group works to build self-esteem and develop life skills and teamwork.

"Having students see that there are others besides themselves" is how Schafer describes it.

"I get a lot of enjoyment out of seeing them realize the world doesn't revolve around them," he said.



The Schafer family on a hike in Starkey Park: Don (left), Cynthia, Matt, Stephen and Becca.

Photo submitted

Before a trip gets started, Camptown instructors find out what the goals of the trip are — generally to boost self-esteem or teach basic life skills — and plan what activities will be used to teach those goals. They also meet with the kids, letting them know what they can expect on the trip and teaching them things like how to cook and familiarizing them with the backpacking equipment. They also talk about rules, such as how Camptown expects the kids to handle themselves.

"We'll talk about having to deal with conflict, because it will arise on the trail ... and our expectations, because we are a faith-based organization," Schafer said.

Bringing groups out into the wilderness helps the group bond, both with each other and with the instructors.

"The wilderness creates that need to learn," Cynthia Schafer

explained. "Your way out there. You have to do it. You have to learn to survive."

Camptown provides training for students before going out on a hike, but that can't replicate the experience of being forced to rely on themselves and their fellow campers in an environment they likely have never been in before.

"We've been asked 'why do this out in the woods?' The wilderness atmosphere ... it levels the playing field for all of them," Don Schafer said. "When they step out of their comfort zone, they're more open to learning experiences."

Kids in the programs range from church groups taking a retreat to inner city students who have never seen a forest before. Schafer said Camptown also has programs for kids with behavioral problems or disabilities such as ADD. The group also works with incarcerated kids who are about to be sent home, taking them and a parent on a wilderness excursion to "build the parent-child relationship," Cynthia Schafer said.

She said that for all the kids, the experience is so intense that it will stick in their minds, as will any of the coaching or instruction they get during the trip.

Spiritual guidance is built in to the experience, as well as physical and mental challenges that Don Schafer says "stretch" the campers, such as rope challenges, games and other team-building exercises.

"Our goal is to help youth find a better path," Don Schafer said.

"With peer pressure these days, sometimes they can only see one path ... our mission is to show them there is another path they can follow that has more hope to it."

Youth leadership is another focus, he said. Camptown has programs for kids who had been on a trip and shown a willingness to help others and gain experiences. Some who participate in the leadership program go on to working with Camptown as volunteers who help lead trips.

The Schafers have expanded Camptown's scope, using it as a medium to reach out to adults and the corporate world, too. They are currently planning the first corporate trip, working with the company to determine what goals the program should include.

"We take them out into the woods to accomplish those goals instead of into a conference room," Don Schafer said.

The couple also plan to lead a five-day camping trip for newlyweds, where they will discuss Biblical aspects of marriage each night.

While Camptown offers several basic camping packages, Cynthia Schafer said programs can be designed for almost any group. As the group's researcher, putting together material for those trips generally falls to her.

"A lot depends on what the partner organization want done," she said.

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