LEARN AT SUMMER CAMP

Those who know me, know I am passionate about my work, teaching others about the environment whenever the opportunity arises. I’d like to share a little of my past and ask you to help share the spark that got me going with others.

My mom was born and raised in Ft. Myers, down south on the west coast. She grew up when you knew or were related to everyone in town. Families helped in the upbringing of neighbor children. She has told me that many times that word of her antics beat her back home when she had gotten into some type of mischief. I grew up watching the Andy Griffith Show and that is the closest I can relate.

Mom and Dad enjoyed being outdoors and bought a home on Crane Creek in Melbourne when I was in elementary school. We would catch bucketfuls of mullet using cane poles and red worms for bait. We fished off the neighbor’s creek bank and dug clams from the river bottom. I remember the sound of live blue crabs climbing out of washtubs in the boat.

We got to get out of school to go camping during hunting season, but we always had homework to do, even in the woods. I watched Dad clean deer and turkeys and feasted on wild game when friends and family brought it home to share.

I didn’t always know what I was seeing or learning; I just knew I liked the feeling of being in the woods or on the water.

One summer, they showed me an article from Florida Wildlife Magazine about YCC, the Youth Conservation Camp, a summer camp near West Palm. It would be my first time away from home, but I don’t remember being too anxious. I do remember the fishing trip to Lake Okeechobee before going to camp: coffee can of worms around my neck, cane pole in my hand, Sea N Ski on my nose, a wide brim hat on my head and a stringer of bream around my waist.

That trip changed my life but I didn’t really get the connection for nearly 25 years.

The camp is now called the Everglades Youth Camp, owned by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in a partnership with Florida Atlantic University.

I had a blast learning nature study, crafts, canoeing and even got my hunter safety patch and certificate. No homesick tears from me. At the end of the week, my counselor encouraged me to go to the other camp the Commission operated in the Ocala National Forest and to consider becoming a camp counselor. I didn't make it to the "North Camp" that summer because of family budget (and maybe a little bit of missing me). But, I did go back as a counselor the following summer and two years later, in my senior year, became camp staff at the YCC in the Ocala National Forest. It has called me back ever since.

I have since worked for Florida 4-H camps in the Ocala National Forest and later got my vocational agriculture teaching certificate because of my camp experiences. It was fun learning and more fun teaching and sharing things I learned with others.

Tomorrow, I leave to share a week in the woods with 123 Lake and Osceola County 4-H youth at our 4-H Camp Ocala.

I am in awe at our 4-H teens that have spent a year preparing for this week. They exhibit such positive attitude and leadership. They have made lesson plans, discussed traditional 4-H activities like the last night candle lighting ceremony. They will teach outdoor cooker, play games, sing silly songs that linger in your head for days. They counsel the younger kids and teach them responsibility for keeping their cabin
and the camp grounds clean for a week. Kids find out their hands do fit a broom handle and they even wipe off the dining tables. And there is no cell phone coverage (so far) and no cable television or video games. I can't even get my email!

Though the teens do the teaching, I am still excited about a chance to see, hear and smell the woods. Who knows how many of these kids will have a similar experience that keeps them coming to the woods for years into the future.

I need your help in getting the word out about the value of summer camp. Please contact me if you have family or friends that might be interested in going to camp or if you would be willing to make a tax deductible donation to help a family send their children to camp. Help me continue to offer these wonderful summer experiences. Call me at 321-697-3000 for more information on the FWC’s Ocala Youth Camp. Sessions are scheduled through the end of July.

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