

What are you learning this summer?



One team of campers took a quick break to take an artsy shot with their nametags.

Dirty cabins. Sketchy showers. No A/C. No cell phone service. A couple of skunks. Oh, and sixty middle school students. Remind me why I signed up for this again? Maybe because my new friend Jesse persuaded me to, and I would get to see her for a few brief hours at the end of the week when our staffs overlapped. And maybe because I felt that small pull inside that told me, "Sign up for JP again. But try Romney this time."

And so I did. I convinced my sister to go with me, and we applied for the first week of camp in Romney, West Virginia, without knowing what to expect. But as we drove the five hours to get there, my body trembled with anticipation, and my eyes were bright with excitement, as if my subconscious knew this would be a life-changing trip, while the rest of me had yet to realize it.

JP, short for Jeremiah

Project, is a weeklong mission camp for middle school students (campers). The camps operate in four different locations throughout the summer. One camp is in Richmond and focuses on inner city mission work; the other three are spread out in Appalachia and tackle construction projects such as building wheel chair ramps, decks and fences, painting, and silver sealing. As a young adult staffer, my job was to lead one of these projects, teaching the campers how to use a hammer or a paint roller and affirming them of their ability to make a difference in the world around them.

At least that's what they told me. I didn't fully believe it. Middle school students can make a difference? Weren't they just filled with drama and were more concerned about their lives than those around them?

That assumption is probably half true. I staffed in Richmond my first year and experienced a fair share of middle school drama, including "dating" and Axe bombs. Our service projects included a lot of scrubbing and dusting, which can be fairly boring tasks and led many campers to complain and take a half-hearted approach.

It wasn't until I staffed Romney in July of 2013 that I came to see how wrong I was about middle school students.

I was nervous to come to Romney. As a nineteen-year-old girl from Williamsburg, I didn't know how I would fair on a construction site. Sure, I knew how to swing a hammer and use a drill. I liked being outside. But leading a project? With middle school students helping me? I fervently prayed that we wouldn't fail.



Staffers create a fun atmosphere on the worksite to keep the campers working hard.

On Monday morning, my team of six campers, one adult leader and I headed out to silver seal, paint and skirt a trailer. The night before, I had closely listened as the tool coordinator explained the details of our assignment. I had a plan of action and was ready to implement it.

We divided up the work. Two students began changing the sides of the trailer from dirty yellow to crisp white. Another two proceeded to cover the roof (and themselves) in sticky silver seal. The last two laid two-by-

The campers became more comfortable with their independence and excited about their ability to serve others.

fours underneath the trailer to prepare for the skirting panels. This left the adult leader and I to dart around the trailer answering questions and keeping everyone on task. Before I knew it, it was lunchtime.

Part of the way JP fosters autonomy is by having the campers pack their own lunches. Sometimes the campers will pack extra for the homeowner we are serving that day. I watched admiringly as two girls approached Eric, the kind gentleman who owned the trailer, and offered him a sandwich, demonstrating their confidence and generosity. As they continued their tasks throughout the rest of the workday, the campers became more comfortable with their independence and excited about their ability to serve others.

Back at camp, the students ran wild. It was amazing that they still had plenty of energy to play Ultimate Frisbee or cartwheel around. After a good six hours of service, they need a break to be kids again.

At 7:30 p.m., we all came inside for evening program. After singing a few



Building wheelchair ramps is one of the campers' favorite projects. This team worked diligently and accomplished more than planned.

worship songs, the director asked the campers where they saw God that day. The response was varied to say the least. Some were goofy, "I saw God in my ability to do a back bend." But others were more serious, "I saw God in Mrs. Combs; she had so much joy even though she

had cancer." Clearly, while middle school

students like to joke around, they also have a deeper side. They are starting to think about serious issues and ask hard questions.

It wasn't until Thursday that I realized just how complicated middle school students are. After a particularly touching morning devotional, I noticed one of the girls quietly crying to the side. I went up to see what was wrong and out came a story I didn't expect to hear. As she pushed up the colored bracelets covering her arms to reveal several tiny scars, she told me of her pain and self-loathing. My heart broke. This precious child, only thirteen years old, was battling self-harm and anorexia, issues that some of my friends struggled with, too. As I hugged her and prayed for her, I realized how important spending time with middle school students is. These children need to know they are loved and cared for. They need people to tell them that they matter. That they can make a difference.

For program that evening, we went down to the fire circle. The night had a weighty tone as the director shared the simple, yet poignant message of the Gospel. Even though many of the campers had grown up in church and probably heard the story their whole lives, it wasn't until they

These children need to know they are loved and cared for. They need people to tell them that they matter.

came to JP that they actually listened to it and accepted it. The opportunity to observe their realizations (and even influence it) humbled me.

Staffing JP opened my eyes to see middle school students differently. Forming individual relationships with these students showed me that the stereotype of awkward and selfish kids isn't always true. If more adults took the time to get to know them, instead of brushing them off, maybe middle school students would struggle less with self-esteem and become more confident in their abilities to help others. They should understand that they really can make a difference.

JP changed my life. It will change yours. Are you ready to serve?

Visit www.jeremiahproject.org for more information on staffing specifics and the application process.