

## Camp Ferguson Continues to Drive Big Change in the Great Outdoors

By Nicole Plegge Sun, Nov 15, 2015



Sleepaway camp is something all kids should have the opportunity to experience once in their young lives. Where they can gaze at a sunset instead of a smartphone and sit around a campfire instead of a computer. Here, they get a break from the everyday and concentrate on building lifelong friendships with their fellow campers.

But thousands of kids in the St. Louis region never get the chance to step foot on a campsite because of financial and transportation barriers that stand in their way. But thanks to Dan Grabel and Andy Brown, owners of [Camp Manitowa in Benton, Ill.](#), kids from the Ferguson area have been able to create memories on the shores of Rend Lake and return home with a new sense of confidence to help their community heal.

With your help, Grabel and Brown can ensure hundreds more are able to experience a life-changing experience in the great outdoors this April through Manitowa's Camp Ferguson.

### **An escape in a time of confusion**

As lifelong St. Louisans, Grabel and Brown were devastated as they watched the violent unrest in Ferguson following the Michael Brown shooting. As camp directors who work with kids eight weeks in the summer and at retreats throughout the year, their first thought went to the students whose schools were closed and their days filled with chaos.

Their second thought – how to help them.

“The best thing about running your own camp is that you can do things on the spur of the moment,” said Grabel. “When we read about the schools closing, we decided the best thing we could do was offer free weekend retreats to the kids – to give them a place to get away from the unrest and violence and chaos, albeit for a few days. Just so they could run and play and have fun together.”

The two reached out to nonprofits and congregations in North County through Facebook and were eventually connected to the superintendent of the Riverview Gardens School District. With help from school counselors at Westview Middle School, Grabel and Brown were able to invite kids who lived in the same apartment complex as Michael Brown to a free weekend of camp, complete with transportation, accommodations, food, and camp necessities.

From the moment the kids entered Camp Ferguson, they put the unrest behind them, spending three days exploring, playing and bonding – and most importantly, just being kids.

Campers experienced the thrill of ziplining and the exhilaration of conquering the rock wall. One counselor brought fishing poles along, and a group of boys sat for hours along the lake, cheering over their catches of the day. They canoed during the afternoon and spent their evenings bonding around the campfire.

But through play, they built powerful skills that could help them push through the problems in their neighborhood and connect with others in a new way to help them in their own healing.

“Anytime kids go to a different place together, there’s that shared sense of adventure and a commonality of support,” said Grabel. “Away from their parents and out of their comfort zone, they lean on each other to feel safe and have fun. That support they give each other is so important not just when they’re here, but when they return home. These relationships are something we can all learn from.”

He added, “Camp gave them a chance to try things they never had before – the zipline, ropes course, canoeing – that’s all unique to them. But taking that frightening jump from a 50 foot high platform on the zipline, it helps them feel confident to take positive risks and face other fears in their life. My hope is when they returned home, they saw life a little differently.”

Finally, kids were able to connect with each other in a new way. By bonding through the strengths many kids hide – especially preteens – the kids were able to become closer and cheer each other on through any challenge camp had in store for them.

### **Building on what works**

Through its relationships with St. Louis nonprofits and organizations, Camp Manitowa has been able to expand its offerings to more kids.

For instance, three students from the University of Missouri-St. Louis School of Social Work accompanied Westview at the first fall retreat. Two of the students took what they learned and did a fall practicum at Westview as their placement site. They were able to help Brown and Grabel develop the program even further, and joined the kids when they returned in Spring 2015 for a second retreat.

Since that first retreat, Camp Manitowa has hosted five more, including one for Jennings High School and a week-long camp for kids from the PAKT Community Resource Center in North County.



This October, the camp brought together students from various afterschool programs in Ferguson and the Saul Mirowitz Jewish Day School who’ve been working together in the [Peace Through Pyramids](#) program with Circus Harmony. For three days, kids from all different backgrounds were able to learn together and play together, breaking down barriers that too often exist in our region.

“What it comes down to is, kids are kids. Regardless of what a kid’s background is, they just want to have fun and make new friends. No matter where a child comes from in St. Louis, this is a place where they’re free just to be themselves.”

Now celebrating Camp Ferguson's first anniversary, Brown and Grabel want to grow the camp even more and build on the connections they helped fuel. However, they need the community's help. A [GoFundMe site](#) has been set up, allowing anyone who's interested to make a contribution to get more kids to camp this April.

For more information on Camp Manitowa and Camp Ferguson, visit [campmanitowa.com](http://campmanitowa.com).

*Photos: Camp Manitowa on [Facebook](#)*