

Do You Really Know Your Campers?

By Mary W. Conklin

With a large organization camp of more than 160 campers and a staff of 55, such as I have directed for the past four years, it is easy for a director to be bogged down in the many administrative duties, office detail, phone calls, salesmen, and innumerable problems and questions from all sides. It is not hard to get in the office in the morning, and not get out for the whole day.

Yet, my 20 years in private camping had convinced me that when a director cannot know each camper as an individual, cannot have personal contact with each camper—the camp is too large. The problem, then, was how could this belief be given meaning in a large camp. The suggestions which follow have worked for me, and may be of interest to directors of other large camps.

First, have your assistant director or business manager take care of the office. Important decisions which must involve the director can be saved, or if immediate action is needed, the director's whereabouts can be known. Having accomplished this first objective, the next step is to close the door of your own office and get out into camp. How else can you get to know your campers?

Before the opening of camp, take it upon yourself to do some of the "busy" work usually assigned to office help. Go over camper registration cards and enrollment lists for unit placement. Help with baggage marking when it arrives. Talk to parents on Open House Day. Handle correspondence from parents yourself.

Names of children will begin to find their place in your "head-file." You now know in which unit many children will be placed. Different kinds of special requests classify these names as campers whom you know about.

On opening day of camp, be on hand when unit leaders greet new campers and read the names of those who will be in their units. As each camper walks out with his belongings, you will remember many of them for some small characteristic.

Visit each unit campfire that evening, their first night in camp. They will be playing some kind of get-acquainted game. Join their circle and you will get to know a few more campers. Even 15 minutes is enough time in a unit for campers to meet the director, and for you to get a "feel" of the group.

During the camp session read a poem or thought-for-the-day each morning after flag raising. Get involved personally with homesick campers or campers with other individual problems. Spend an hour or so at swimming or crafts. Do some teaching in any area where you are competent and can help. Attend all-camp activities. Don't be too old to put on a silly costume. Join cook-outs; eat with a group of campers at a picnic supper; lead songs.

If a camper receives a phone message, take it to him yourself, and you'll remember who he is from then on.

Be chauffeur for groups leaving or returning from camping or canoe trips You will hear first-hand opinions and reports of campers during the ride.

As often as you can, get a few groups each evening to say goodnight to those campers who live there. Sit down and talk to them for a few minutes,

Some directors have said that all the above should be handled by unit leaders, program coordinators and other camp personnel. Let's put it this way—they can be handled by other personnel. But if they are, in this writer's opinion, both director and campers have lost something very valuable and very good.

Knowing your campers will open up new worlds for you, new appreciations of the many different backgrounds from which your campers have come. Camping is for children. If you tie yourself up with administration all the time, you will have lost the most gratifying, the most wonderful part of camp, the simple honesty of a child's thoughts, the happy smile of friendliness, that only a child can give you. When you no longer want to do things with children, you are too old to be a camp director.

A Happy Task

When our campers leave at the end of their encampment, they bid a personal good-bye to the director, a person whom they have come to know while at camp because she has been here, there and everywhere, a part of all that was camp. She has used her experience, her know how, her personality in a positive kind of leadership. She has not delegated this most important and happy task to less experienced staff members.

The most treasured document this director has received was found on the desk after the last bus had driven off at the close of a season. It was a note signed by a group of 15-year-old campers, and read, "We have been coming to camp for four or five summers. Please come back year. You are the first director who ever knew our names."