

## INDIANA ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS 2010

# Camptown, Inc.

## Indianapolis

**P**urpose, intent and outcome aren't terms generally associated with outdoor adventure, and that's just one of the things that makes the Camptown experience unique. Using activities like backpacking, canoeing, hiking and nature education, Camptown builds confidence, character and hope in youth from all walks of Indiana life.

Children reap wide benefits from a nature experience – from improved self-discipline, to better physical health, to improved emotional well being. Yet today's youth are more detached from nature than ever before. Although environmental awareness is taught in school, actual wilderness experiences are few and far between. As Camptown President, Don Schafer says, "Young people today may have a better knowledge of the importance of rain forests to the world, but they probably can't identify the trees in their local parks and yards."

Camptown is giving today's kids what their parents and grandparents took for granted: a chance to learn about themselves, each other and the world around them through outdoor exploration. While camping and participating in other adventure programs, kids build personal responsibility, leadership, teamwork and conflict resolution skills. Even more, they begin to see a vision beyond their life circumstances.

As one camper put it, "Our first day was eight miles up the side of a mountain. When I reached the top, I knew that I could do anything I put my mind to." Schafer concurs, "By transporting kids out of the concrete jungle and into the woods, we create an environment where kids really open up – to themselves and to new ways of thinking about the problems life puts in their paths."

In 2009, kids from urban, suburban and rural communities, at risk and adjudicated youth, disabled youth and simply those without another opportunity to explore the wonders of nature all participated in Camptown programs.



Camptown services are provided through collaborative partnerships with other youth-serving organizations, and delivered via onsite Camptown staff who lead and participate every step of the way. "Instead of competing with other organizations for participants, we come alongside them developing programs that help achieve their organizational goals," Schafer explains. Camptown even assists partner organizations with funding for the program through grant consultation and proposal writing, and corporate and individual contributions.

Donations, grants and fundraising efforts support Camptown's year round program in nearly equal measure. Sound financial stewardship allowed the program to increase the number of youth served from 174 in 2004 to 2,228 in 2009 without increasing the operating budget.



Schafer attributes much of Camptown's success to its flexible, creative and ever-changing programs. Partners and participants are an ongoing source of new ideas, and their feedback plays a direct role in making sure the learning needs of the students are met. When stakeholders identified a need for programs directed at students too young for overnight or weeklong camps, Camptown responded with its Natural Wonders Day Camp. This one-day nature immersion proved so popular in its first year that two full weeks of day programs were offered in 2010.

Camptown's focus started on and remains on making a measurable impact on youth. Program evaluations show 96 percent of participants report growth in leadership skills and self-confidence. Ninety-nine percent of adult partners report student growth on the same indicators.

That's the intent. "Every class, every hike, every canoe trip, every service project and every activity has a purpose," Schafer says. "Every day, we're building on our past successes while challenging Camptown to make a greater impact on our kids."

A young camper speaks to the organization's success: "Of everything I've done in my life, I think my time at Camptown was the most rewarding."