

# Society of St. Vincent de Paul Camp History

Camp Ozanam and Camp Stapleton are owned and operated by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, an independent Catholic lay organization, which responds to the needs of the poor of all creeds and ethnic backgrounds. Our volunteer Vincentians are very generous of their time and giving from their hearts. Since 1923, thanks to our volunteers and donor support, our camping program has allowed over 100,000 disadvantaged youngsters the opportunity to enjoy a fully funded camping experience along the shores of Lake Huron. Our program provides children who are underprivileged and suffering familial economic hardship with the chance to enjoy outdoor activities in a Catholic summer camp environment. John Lesjack (a retired educator, now from the San Rosa, California area) wrote about 1951: “All these years, I had thought we were poor because my father, the breadwinner of the family, had died six months before camp. I didn’t know his death caused me to be labeled underprivileged. If I had been provided an opportunity to enjoy a summer camp environment because I was underprivileged, would camp have been as much fun? You bet! The truth for me is that camp would have been fun at any price. My joke would have been: Being UNDERprivileged meant I made my own wallet in leather crafts. The OVERprivileged had their wallets made for them.”



Camper fees have been and are currently fully funded through donations from individuals, corporations, and foundations. In its heyday, both camps, Ozanam and Stapleton housed 200 campers during each camping “trip” which lasted two weeks. By the time 2007 rolled around, camperships were limited to 400 per summer (boys and girls), largely due to budget constraints and campers stay for a one week period. Our current traditional subsidized summer camp for children whose families are suffering hardships runs five one week camping trips during the summer and is open for children ages 8 to 14. In order to register, families typically go through a Vincentian in their local parish. There are a few Catholic agencies that also screen and recommend children for the camping program.

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL  
CAMPING PROGRAM

- OZANAM - 1922
- STAPLETON - 1940
- 80,000 CAMPERS
- FREE TO ALL
- FOUR 2-WEEK TRIPS
- 1,760 CHILDREN EA. YR.
- 46% NON-CATHOLIC
- 62% MINORITY
- FIVE COUNTIES SERVED

Our camps are located on the shores of Lake Huron approximately 85 miles northeast of Detroit. Directions from the Metropolitan Detroit area: I-94 east to Port Huron, follow M-25 towards Lexington north along Lake Huron. Camp Stapleton is three miles north of Lexington and Camp Ozanam is eight miles further.

Although it is not stated in the Society's mission statement, it is believed that the camping program did an awful lot for improving race relations throughout the metropolitan Detroit area. As the various cabins were formed, children were blended into a new grouping; kids from the same neighborhood were NOT placed in the same cabin. Diversity was encouraged and many lifelong friendships were formed. Color was transparent.

On July 20, 1969 Apollo 11 landed on the moon and what a great accomplishment that was for mankind. Camp Ozanam Head counselor, John Paddock, wrote a letter to the editor of the Detroit Free Press. John put out a plea saying that he ran a summer camp and that the campers would not be able to watch this historic event as they had no TVs available. Dave Mondry, then owner of Highland Appliance, responded to the plea and donated the use of two TVs (one for each camp) to share this crowning moment of history. Even back then, Dave knew that the St. Vincent de Paul camping program was a community effort, which is enriched by the donations and prayerful support of all its benefactors.

Throughout the history of the camps, the Vincentians and camp staff were always very aware of cost and did as much of the work themselves as possible to not be a burden on the budget – it was a labor of love. In the 70's many of the repairs were done by the Vincentians themselves; John Herbertson was the facilities chairman and their fearless leader. Doug Wing was also a part of this effort. Since 2009, Rick Krucker, his crew, and Vincentians like Jack Virga have been responsible for upgrades including finishing the interior of Blackrobes Wigwam.

We began partnering with the Camp America Program in 1987, which adds cultural diversity to the camp experience by welcoming men and women from around the world as staff members. On their days off, these Camp America staff people were “adopted” into homes of their American counterparts. Cricket and a more authentic version of soccer were added to the program. Numerous countries sent staff members, as can be witnessed just as you cross over the bridge entering the north side of camp – with signs and distances to those countries proudly displayed in the woods.

In 1991, the first year round Director of Camp Operations, Renee Deroche, was hired to serve both camps and in the summer she served as the Director of Camp Ozanam. Under the lead and direction of Renee, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul proudly celebrated 75 years of their history in 1998.



With a smaller staff and limited involvement of seminarians, the traditional “work week” in which the camps were “opened up” and cleaned up was eliminated. But the camps need to be cleaned at the start of the season. In the early 2000’s, a Camp clean-up day was instituted and as many volunteers as possible came up and spent the day sprucing up the camps. In 2004, Starbucks Coffee Company came up with a large number of employees and did some amazing work, fortified by some pretty good coffee. The camp work day still continues to this day the first Saturday of May with over 60 volunteers (alumni, Vincentians and friends) who join us to prepare both camps for the summer.



Unfortunately, due to economic restraints, the Society closed Camp Stapleton in 2004. As a result, co-ed camping was established at Camp Ozanam and still continues today.

## The Vincentians

The real backbone behind the success of the camping program was and is the Vincentians, the volunteer members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The main role of the Vincentians, as far as the camping program is concerned, is twofold. They were/are the fundraisers, who solicited donations, both in terms of money and goods, to ensure the success of the camping program. Their other role was/is to go out to the neighborhoods in their parishes and find the children who were/are to be the beneficiaries of the camping program. As stated earlier, those children who attended camp were labeled as underprivileged. That term could describe their family’s monetary needs, but also children with an absent parent and children who needed to develop their social skills. There have been thousands of Vincentians who have served in that role in these last 90 years, many of whose names will not be recorded.

As we know, one of the dangers in listing names is that many valuable members’ names have been lost throughout history, especially with the loss of the “logs,” which were diligently kept. Should the readers know of names to be added to

the list please come forward. Some of the notables include: Bill Rohrkemper, B.A. Seymour, Jack Glaser, Ray Schlinder, Ray Beirman, John Herbertson, Bob Matchan, Ray Pfau, Bernie Conway, Joe Clark, Doug Wing, Emmett Roach, Jack Virga, Carrie Moore, Barb Koster, and Mike Thoen. Thank you Vincentians one and all.

## The Employees of Central Office

The “hired help” of St. Vincent de Paul were also a “behind the scenes” gift that made the camping program happen. Once again we are faced with the daunting task of remembering the names of employees of the past. Some of those names include: Pat Skinner, Patrick Adamcik, Roger Playwin, Tom Moore, Bill Brazier, and hundreds more.

The work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society was certainly part of a collaborative effort. Much of the surplus that was generated in the Society’s resale stores was presented to the camping program, what better way to invest in the future.

Central Services employees continue to be an active part of the camp program. The Development Department is given the task to raise the needed funds to send the children to camp and they assist with raising funds for capital projects, a number of employees assist with Vincentian and Alumni Saturday during the summer program, the Accounting Department for the numerous check requests and timely payments. Of course, the SVdP resale stores continue to provide for our campers clothing needs along with hosting Camper Enrollment Gatherings. Special thanks to Helena Powers, the Executive Assistant, who has assisted in so many ways throughout the years that we cannot begin to list.

Thank you to one and all of the employees over the past 90 years! We would not have made it this far without you!

## Camp Caretakers

One of the most important positions behind the scenes is, as we all know, the Camp Caretaker. The men who have held this position have been responsible for all of the grounds, electrical, plumbing, carpentry, painting, etc. at both summer camps. These men have been the most dedicated and, due to their longevity, very few men have held this position. Bob Conlen was one of the first. He was beloved by all. His birthday celebration was one of the highlights of the summer camping season.

Jim Doyle was hired as the camp caretaker in 1963, succeeding Bob Conlen. Jim was employed for 35 years, retiring from full time service in 1998. However, through the Camp Connect program he continued to serve and care for those camp grounds. Following knee surgery in 2012, Jim was asked if he was ready to retire. Jim responded, "No." His wife Maryann said, "Yes!" To state that Jim Doyle was a genius would be an understatement. Jim Doyle knew how to pinch a penny. Various buildings at the camps were painted whatever color Jim could get a deal on or better yet get the paint donated. All of the tables currently used in the Seymour Dining Hall were built by Jim during the off-season. If you look under the tables, you will find his name on all of them. He is also a recipient of the Camp Medallion Award. One of the earliest stories about Jim on record comes from Sr. Betty Jenkins. Sister tells of the time she could hear a loud sound of distress coming from Lake Huron. Jim, with his brother Joe (*who is also an alumni of Ozanam*), went to the lake and discovered a deer flailing in the water. Sister is not sure how he did it, but somehow Jim got that deer into a rowboat, brought it to the shore, and set it free. Rowboats bring to life another story about Jim. Jim was in a rowboat directing the staff as to the placement of the water lifeguard towers. Lake Huron is always frigid and the staff good naturedly began to splash Jim. Jim was swinging an errant oar at the staff, and nearly capsized the boat.



The grounds were the most beautifully landscaped up and down the lakeshore. To say that Jim was a perfectionist would be an understatement. Thank you Jim and Maryann for your commitment to the camping program.

Jim was succeeded by Bill Kartheiser, from the Cros-Lex schools. Bill briefly worked at the camps and was a part of the beginning of the major renovations on the south side of Camp Ozanam. In addition to the caretaker position, he was contracted for the renovations to the chapel. He did an amazing job at transforming the St. Anne's Chapel into the masterpiece it is today.

Bill was succeeded by Gil Ferranti in 2005. Gil created a team approach to the maintenance staff and during his time they were able to work on a number of capital projects. In the fall of 2009, when Gil decided it was time to move on and actually begin enjoying retirement, Rick Krucker took on the position.

Rick too has the same pride and work ethic as his predecessors and continues to properly supervise not only Camp Ozanam and Camp Stapleton but also both CYO Camps as well. One of Rick's wise moves was to rehire Jim Doyle on a

part time basis (2009 -12). There have been numerous capital projects that have been done at Camp Ozanam during this time frame that include the beach stairs and deck, completion of Blackrobes Wigwam, a new Arts & Crafts building and the removal of the old building.

## Camp Pay

Nobody has ever worked at camp for the money in the early days. The greatest pay a staff member would ever receive was watching the appreciation that was registered on the face of the campers. Knowing that we were able to help the less fortunate was pay enough. In 1966 there was no pay for the kitchen staff. Once a week we were treated to a trip to the Dairy Queen in Lexington and we were able to select one item for free – lots of king-sized shakes on those days! The following summer we received \$10.00 per week. At that time we were all seminarians so there was also some deduction of our tuition bill. In 1969, our pay was \$42.50 per week, a weird number. In the early 90's the pay was \$180.00 per week. There was a brief period in which counselors could receive college credit, by meeting with an instructor and writing a paper to describe their experiences. In early 2000's staff could take a "Group Psychology" course for college credit through Madonna University. In 2013, the per week pay for a counselor was \$210.00, an administrative team member \$280, and for an Activity Specialist \$175. Not much has changed in this area.

## Camp Medallion Award

The Camp Medallion Award was created in 2003 to honor individuals for outstanding service to the camps and presented to the recipient during the Annual Vincentian and Alumni Day held during the summer camp program.

The first recipient was Bernie Conway, long time camp chairman, whose enthusiastic fundraising efforts were contagious and appreciated. Other honorees subsequent to Bernie, include: Bishop Frank Reiss (a counselor in the 50's), Ray Biermann (another former camp chairman), Tom Moore (former Executive Director), Doug and Linda Wing (active Vincentians) Jim Doyle (camp caretaker 1963 – and still involved in 2012), Carrie Moore (camp enrollment chair), Jim Kiefer (counselor and administrator in the 70's and a Vincentian who continued with staff training into 2000's), Jack Virga (an active Vincentian from the eastside concerned with the camp facilities), John Herbertson (camp facilities chairman), Stanley Wegrzynowicz (Ozanam director from 1972-76) and in 2013 Mary Jo Evans was recognized for her many years of service on the Camp Stapleton staff and on the camp committee.

## Camp Romances

**Mike and Cathy Morris** met at Camp Ozanam in 1976 under unusual circumstances. Mike was a Detroit police officer who was laid off and thus had some free time. He had affection towards the camping program that started with his seminarian days so he decided to spend that time at Ozanam. Cathy was a former Camp Health Director. She learned that the camp was in dire need of a nurse to supervise the “MASH unit” while the regular Camp Health Director (Mike Krowisz) was at school being certified. Cathy took a week off from her regular job to help at camp. Their romance really took off on those hallowed 34 acres. They met in June and were married the following December 11<sup>th</sup> at a wedding officiated by their friend and former Camp Health Director, Fr. Tim Dombrowski.

**Chuck and Jeannie (Byron) Piotrowski** met at Ozanam in 1977. Chuck was the new Camp Director and Jeannie was the Kitchen Manager at Stapleton. Jeannie came to Ozanam in a panic because there was a problem with the dishwasher at Stapleton. Chuck, not wanting to admit his technical ignorance, faked an explanation. Thus began their romance. Many of their dates were either spent playing Aggravation or sitting at the Stone Lodge. Their first passionate kiss (in which they finally admitted their affection) was on the beach of Lake Huron. They were married on August 24, 1979 by Jeannie’s uncle (Earl Loeffler) and another former camp staff member and friend, Fr. Ron Victor.



**Matt and Melanie (Adamcik) Olk** met at the Camp Ozanam in 1993 where Matt worked as a Counselor and Melanie came up for the last week of camp to help Renne Deroche with her children. Melanie worked at the Central Office at that time doing enrollment and would work at Camp Stapleton the following summer as the Office Manager while Matt continued on as a counselor. Their wedding was actually celebrated at Camp Ozanam on June 15, 1996. Their wedding pictures include one of Melanie playing volleyball in her wedding dress and Matt playing pool in his tux in the Roundhouse.

**Joe and Lynette (Hanus) Roy** began their relation at Camp Ozanam having met during a summer when Lynette worked in arts and crafts and Joe worked on the maintenance crew. They later married. They have purchased property less than a ½ mile from Camp Ozanam and frequent the camp often.

## Keeping Camp in the Family

Once somebody in a family gets involved at camp, it is not unusual for other family members to join the staffs' ranks. Some examples include...

- ... Stan Wegrzynowicz was the Camp Director at Ozanam and his daughter, Ann, later worked at Stapleton.
- ... Jay Yule worked at Ozanam in the late 60's and early 70's. His daughter, Sarah, followed in the kitchen in the early 2000's and his son, Dave, will also be working at Ozanam in 2013. *As a side note, in the 60's – Jay's mom would show up several times each summer with her trusty sewing machine to mend a lot of torn clothes from the staff.*
- ... Ray Biermann was the Camp Chairman and his son, John, worked at Ozanam.
- ... Chuck Piotrowski worked at Ozanam. His sister, Pat, was a counselor at Stapleton. And when his dad, Hank, was laid off from McLouth Steel he was the cook for parts of 2 seasons in the mid 70's.
- ... Pat Adamcik has worked at the Central Office for years and his daughter, Melanie, worked at camp and met her husband there.
- ... Jeannie Byron (Piotrowski) was the Kitchen Manager at Stapleton and her brother, Chuck, was a Counselor at Ozanam.
- ... Three of the Marcoux sisters worked at Stapleton: Sue, Michele, and Ann.
- ... Both "Butch" Sue Lemieux and her sister, "Chuck" Colleen, worked at Stapleton. Additionally both of these girls joined the staff after enjoying the camps as campers.
- ... Jim Doyle not only recruited his brother, Joe Doyle, to work, he also volunteered his son Clem and wife Maryann on numerous occasions to assist during his 35 years of working at camp.
- ... Joe and Lynette (Hanus) Roy sent both of their daughters to work at Camp Ozanam. First Kayla joined us for a summer and Danielle followed directly behind her older sister. Danielle (aka "Sparkles") is currently serving on staff as an Activity Specialist.
- ... Penny Nunn worked at Camp Ozanam as Assistant Director in 2005 and continued on with the collaborative. Her daughter, Lauren Nunn, worked along with her for two summers (07-08).
- ... The King family children (William, Stephanie, and Ashley) joined the ranks of staff in the 2000's after each had been previous campers.



Pat and Melanice Adamcik on her big day at Camp Ozanam.



- ... Ken “Oak” Pullis, Camp Director since 2007, recruited his brother Stephen Pullis to work a summer while he was a seminarian. Fr. Steve now tries to say a mass with the campers each summer.
- ... Not only were they campers but both Ramsey and Nandi A’Ve worked at Camp Ozanam in the late 2000’s and Nandi joined us once again in 2013 to work as a counselor for a few weeks in our time of need.



Ken & Fr. Steve Pullis summer of 2012

## Camp Pranks

A larger section could be dedicated to this, as pranks are certainly a part of camp tradition. (Please come forward with pranks that you recall, not included here.) Pranks were often carried out between the two St. Vincent camps or sometimes between Ozanam and CYO Boys, separated only by a clump of trees. The only problem with pranks is when they got carried too far and had to be outlawed for a period of time.

The most unique prank goes to the ladies from Camp Stapleton. They took the camp horse, Susie, and led Susie into the Roundhouse. They tied her in place so she could not hurt herself. One can only begin to imagine the reaction of Ozanam Counselors as they walked into that Roundhouse and found Susie, with all of her droppings roaming the halls. Retaliation is always part of any prank; I am sure that the boys from “OZ” did not disappoint the girls.

From the 40’s through the 70’s all camp activities were announced with the playing of various bugle calls. One particular prank featured a counselor playing Taps at 3 AM. The prank backfired as very few people were awakened, but the camp director was in the parking lot feeling hoods of cars to try to determine who had just returned to camp.

On another occasion, there was an outbreak of Hepatitis on the campgrounds. It was determined that anyone who came into contact with the infected camper had to be inoculated. It was a simple and painless process. A quick shot in the arm was all that was needed. As the counselors weighed more, the size of the dosage had to be increased. This writer, a larger counselor, was given a double dose. However, the CHD decided to have fun with me and gave me one shot in each cheek – each shoulder would have sufficed. But I did as instructed and was the subject of a few jokes.

## Camp Facility Rentals

Both of the camps are beautiful and are available to rent. The monies received from the rentals supplement the camp budget. In the off season, many of the seminarians visited for a weekend – especially when there was lots of snow and they were warmed by the fire in the old Priest’s Cabin. For many years, Bernie Conway had his family reunion at the camp. This was a tradition that the Koster family also followed and still does today in 2012. The camp has been rented out for retreats, scrapbooking, band camps, and football camps. In recent years the staff has been invited back for a winter get-together/retreat. One of the highlights of this is the annual Polar Bear Plunge.

## Camp History Cabin

The old “Mash” cabin was turned into a camp history and store cabin in 2011. If you have history to share, of either camp, the camp office will be happy to add it to this building. Just send it our way.

