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Rush City, Minn.

A Camp for Exposure:

Camp Sunrise, a free camp along the St. Croix River, offers many teens from St. Paul and Minneapolis their first experience 'roughing it' and their first interactions with people of cultures different from their own.

BY MARY DIVINE

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Jeff Xiong, Camp Sunrise director, shows off his dance moves Thursday as he announces the Hip-Hop Village, part of the Rush City, Minn., camp's Cultural Village Day. Camp counselors presented information about African-American heritage; the history of hip-hop; and Hispanic, Asian and Aborigine cultures. (SHERRI LAROSE-CHIGLO, Pioneer Press)

 [Photo slideshow](#)

Jeff Xiong slept in a tent, used an outhouse and paddled a canoe for the first time during his first trip to Camp Sunrise on the St. Croix River in 1996. After a week in the wilderness, Xiong discovered he loved the great outdoors. He returned to the camp near Rush City, Minn., as a camper the next three summers and later worked as a camp counselor.

Earlier this year, Xiong, now 24, was named camp director. The camp is free for St. Paul and Minneapolis teens from low- and moderate-income families and diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

For many, Camp Sunrise is the first place they interact with people from cultures other than their own, Xiong said. An African-American boy who befriended two boys from eastern Burma at Camp Sunrise this summer said it "was the first time he had ever met anyone from outside the United States," Xiong said.

The boys - who all live in Minneapolis - bonded over campfires during a three-day canoe trip. They plan to stay in touch after camp, Xiong said.

"They meet friends they wouldn't normally meet in the cities," Xiong said. "Somali, Latino, Hmong kids all become friends, and it's wonderful to watch that bond grow."

There is no electricity at the camp, and the teens must learn to live for a week without TV, iPods, Game Boys and cell phones. Xiong said it forces the teens to talk to and learn about each other.

"We're introducing the youth of today to real space instead of cyberspace," Xiong said. "Out here, they're

more social. People can just enjoy real conversations with each other. It's very simplistic living up here, and it's interesting what reaction you get from youth when you take them away from the cities."

Kameisha Wilson, 16, of Minneapolis said learning to live without electricity took some getting used to during her first visit to Camp Sunrise last summer. But, she said, she learned that "electricity doesn't mean everything. You can still survive without it."

"You learn how to use your brain," Kameisha said. "You have to use nature to survive."

It took a little longer for her 13-year-old sister, Bakita Wade, to adjust to wilderness living. It was so dark at night, she said, that she couldn't see her hand in front of her face. Then she thought she heard a bear sniffing around outside her tent.

"I kept hearing noises," Bakita said. "I've never been in that much darkness. I had to wake my sister up to go with me to the (outhouse). It's just so dark. It's scary."

Bakita said she was struck by the contrast with life at home. "I've had to learn how to use my time instead of watching TV," she said. "It's more peaceful out here. I'm not used to hearing birds chirping. I'm used to hearing cars driving by and sirens blaring. But it's beautiful at night. I've never seen stars like that. It's really pretty."

She said she missed her mother, flush toilets, hot showers and her "big, comfortable bed."

"That outhouse is nasty. It's just nasty," she said. "Sleeping in the cot ... it's really hard. It's like lying on the floor."

Xiong joked that the camp's cots, platform tents and unheated showers would be a luxury for Bakita after she returned from a three-day canoe trip. The teens are driven 32 miles upstream and then canoe back to the camp. There are no showers, and campers sleep on the ground in sleeping bags.

"They think this is rustic and then they go out on the river and come back here and it's heaven," Xiong said. "You learn to love cold showers when you're at Camp Sunrise."

Xiong, who lives in White Bear Township, grew up in St. Paul and North St. Paul. Many of his 10 older brothers and sisters also went to and worked for Camp Sunrise. He graduated from the University of Minnesota-Morris in 2005 with a degree in organizational management.

Xiong is the first Hmong camp director and the second former camper to hold the post. Craig Luedemann, the executive director of YouthCARE, the nonprofit organization that runs the camp, said Xiong is a great example of the camp's mission.

"We bring kids together from different backgrounds and cultures and then provide opportunities for them to stay involved long-term," Luedemann said. "He's one of many young people who got involved and then stayed connected through the school year and found those opportunities to be a leader."

About 250 youth go to Camp Sunrise each year. More than 12,000 teens have attended since the camp opened in 1974 on 300 acres owned by Xcel Energy.

Xcel and the Minneapolis and St. Paul Summer Youth Employment Programs established the camp. Xcel Energy partially funds Camp Sunrise through its foundation, and company employees who volunteer as camp counselors for a week can receive their regular wages. Xcel also participates in a mentoring program for kids from YouthCARE.

School counselors and youth-employment program workers refer campers to the program. More than 90 percent of the campers are youth of color, and Xiong and Luedemann recruit and employ adult and junior staff members who represent the campers' ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Every child should have the opportunity to go to summer camp, Luedemann said.

"Kids have a right to have that (wilderness) experience," Luedemann said. "What they do with it will be their choice. We're just opening the door. The reality is that we're one of the few programs left still reaching urban kids who can't afford to do this on their own."

Campers can return to the camp in the winter, he said. "Youth we had to coax to come out in the summer are eager to come back in the school year and experience cross country skiing and snowshoeing.

"It works every year," he said. They feel it's their place, and we'll keep trying to perform that magic."

Mary Divine covers Washington County. She can be reached at mdivine@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5443.

If you go

The public is invited to visit Camp Sunrise from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday . The camp is on the banks of the St. Croix River near Rush City, Minn. The event is free and transportation will be provided. For more information, go to www.youthcaremn.org or call Katheryn Pettie at 612-338-1233.

Comments

YouthCARE/Camp Sunrise is a wonderful, caring organization and I am happy and lucky to have been a part of it. I grew up in the projects without the luxury of access and the programs they offered taught me I could be a leader and make a difference in the community. Now I am working in community outreach and making the difference that YouthCARE/Camp Sunrise made in my life.

Posted by: Sua Lee 8/19/2007 9:41 PM

If more kids got to have experiences like this, and get to know people from other countries, maybe there would be a bit less hatred and racism in the world. **Posted by: D** 8/19/2007 3:21 PM

CAMP SUNRISE IS A WONDERFUL PLACEHOLDS MANY FOND MEMORIES FROM MY YOUTH.... **Posted by: MARIA(GOULD)FRANCHINO** 8/19/2007 11:22 AM

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