

Character building opportunities at Canyon Camp
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Some public schools today are considering bringing back what is called “character education.” According to Professor Don Kauchak, in his book *Education Psychology*, “character education emphasizes the transmission of moral values, such as honesty and citizenship, and the translation of these values into character traits or behaviors.” This return to teaching character education is taking place because there is a perceived reduction of moral and spiritual values in the lives of the children of this generation. For those who have worked in Scouting through the years, Scouting has always provided for the boys and the young people, who are a part of the Scouting, a sound program that helps each person build his or her own sense of what is moral and what is spiritual. The basic principles of Scouting inspire moral and spiritual development, duty to God, and citizenship development. Scouting principles foster an active participation by young boys and women in the society in which they live. The 12 points of the Scout Law are the character builders, and the scouts are encouraged to try to live those 12 points in their everyday lives. Those twelve points are the rules that guide scouts in life.

Canyon Camp, outside Stockton, Illinois, has been a place where boys and young men and women have experienced Scouting in all its wonder. Entering through the camp gate, one is immediately struck by the beauty of the setting and observes the rules that govern it marking the drive into camp. One reads: “A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.

Each of these Scout Laws is lived throughout the week by scouts while in Canyon Camp. In the dining hall, where the scouts gather for meals three times a day, the walls once again display those laws, and scouts are reminded to keep these laws in whatever activity one is doing. A scout is obedient and clean. Scouts take turns setting and clearing their own tables and helping to tidy up the dining hall after the meals. Scouts are reminded to be friendly as they deal with members of their own troop and the scouts at their tables who they might not know. The scouts are reminded to be kind as they share food and camaraderie. In the trading post where scouts come to purchase snacks and buy items for camp and gifts for family, they are reminded to be thrifty or they learn to be thrifty as they realize that the money they brought along to last a whole week at camp can go fast if not well managed. Throughout the day at camp, in whatever event the scouts are occupied, the staff lives the scout law as an example and gently (most of the time) calls the scouts to do the same. Courteous and helpful become more than words as scouts do activities together. They are called to be trustworthy as they use an axe to chop wood and flint and steel to start a campfire. They are called to be brave as they repel off cliffs, canoe, hike, and shoot arrows. They are cheerful as they sing songs and hang out together at the campsite or at the trading post. They live the 12 points of the Scout Law all day long.

The last point of the Scout Law is very important at Canyon Camp – a scout is reverent. At camp there are prayers before every meal. Scouts have the opportunity to worship during the week. There is usually a chaplain on duty if a scout needs spiritual guidance or just needs a listening ear. There is a nondenominational worship service during the week and Catholic Mass is celebrated in the beautiful camp chapel. There is also a weekly Scout Vesper service, a time when the staff provides an opportunity for the whole camp to reflect on how well scouts, leaders, and staff are living the Scout Oath and the Scout Law. These opportunities allow scouts to look at not just the fun and excitement that physically and mentally engages them and also wears them out, but also prompts them to look at the moral and spiritual aspects of their lives. The camp staff is always looking for ways to bring to conscious awareness the moral and the spiritual aspects that affect the lives of the campers. In the past, the camp has provided ethical decision-making conferences. A couple of staff members would go to a camp site and discuss present day moral issues and how, from a scouting point of view, one might cope with some of the pressing moral issues that scouts encounter at school and in the neighborhood. There have been discussions with older scouts on how the Scout Law has affected their everyday lives. Presently, every week of camp, there is a presentation of the various religious awards. This presentation gives a scout an opportunity to learn about his own religious award, and now he may be able to go home and ask his religious leader to help him earn an award from his own church, temple, mosque or synagogue. Many boys would eventually earn their religious awards after learning about them at Canyon Camp.

Canyon Camp provides a total personal experience for those who come into its mystical setting. It offers a challenge physically, mentally, emotional, morally and spiritually. In short, the camp builds an atmosphere that touches and speaks to the whole person. When a boy returns home and is asked by his mother, who wants to hear all the details, “What happened at camp?” The scout will probably answer “nothing” or “we had fun” or “we did some stuff,” but the reality is so much deeper. At Canyon Camp the scout was asked to allow his whole being to be activated, and he was challenged most often to give the very best of himself to the experience.

Canyon Camp creates a wonderful aura for those who are totally engaged in it. Campers return home spiritually moved as well as physically tired. It is not by chance that through the years scouts have come to name their own experience of this place as coming in contact with “the Spirit of Canyon Camp.”