



Camp Fire USA™

sends kids down the right trail

W O • H E • L O

BY SARAH ZUGSCHWERDT

Would you call getting wet and muddy while crossing rivers a good time? How about cutting vines off of an abandoned, derelict refrigerator before tipping swamp mud out and hauling it away?

For Camp Fire USA members volunteering to clean up Seattle's Dead Horse Canyon, it's the best time around.

"We plant trees and take out plants that aren't supposed to be there like ivy and [noxious] weeds," explains 12-year-old Marshall Clairmont about volunteering in the urban forest. Of course, chasing salamanders, forging their own trails and generally forgetting civilization adds to the excitement of the service activity, making it a favorite with both the Adventure (third-fifth grade) and Horizon (ninth-twelfth grade) Renton Camp Fire groups.

This picture is just what Dr. Luther and Charlotte Gulick envisioned when they started the Camp Fire Girls program in Maine in 1910. The camp fire, they decided, was the original center of community life where work, health and love converged in the people gathered around it. It was also the place where older adults taught the younger generation and prepared them to join the community as caring and confident adults.



RENTON MAGAZINE / SARAH ZUGSCHWERDT

Members or sisters? This Campfire USA group has been together for four years and operates more like a family than a group—unless it's a group of sisters. All are working towards their Wohelo award, the highest honor in Campfire USA.

For information about Camp Fire USA, visit www.campfire-usa.org and follow the links to the Central Puget Sound Council where there's an online interest form. Mary Olsen can also be reached by phone at 206.826.8945.

At each level, the program leads youth on five different "trails" that extend from and lead to the camp fire, like the trail to creativity and the trail to the future. All curriculum activities use research-based educational standards and are customized to a group's interests. In 1975, the program became co-ed. Years following have added Saturday Club, a program for children with disabilities, day camps in addition to long-standing resident camps, and some childcare.

To build leadership, members take turns leading the activities within the group. As students mature, they gradually assume more of the responsibilities of the adult leader.

"We actually have kids graduating from our programs who can lead events for two or three hundred people and do all the planning," says Mary Olsen, director of Camp Fire's Group and Older Youth Programs, Central Puget Sound Council.

Hazen High School junior Maddie Martin says she believes practicing volunteerism and leadership for 11 years in Camp Fire has made her "definitely more self-starting." At Newcastle's Arbor Day celebration, Maddie and

her friends came across a littered hillside. Instead of passing it by, she said – and meant – "We'll have to come back."

Renton High School sophomore Brianna Stepper has found her stride in Camp Fire, starting from the first grade. That year was a bit rough when her young schoolmates decided she didn't fit in. But through Camp Fire's self-discovery and leadership training, she learned that competitions like "who has the prettiest hair" don't matter much and that standing out is actually more important than fitting in.

Now, as part of her Horizon level Wohelo award work (the highest award in Camp Fire, standing for work, health and love), she's planning a project to share this definition of "cool" with the next generation of Camp Fire kids as a camp counselor. But, she admits, even that idea overwhelmed her at first. Yet gradually, watching Camp Fire members ahead of her and taking one trail step at a time, "I realized, 'No! I'm born for this, I can do this, I would love to do this!'" she says adamantly.

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