

Lake Valley Camp's Summer Camp Garden



Every day this summer, a group of teens will gather in the garden at Lake Valley Camp. They discuss what they will be teaching that day, and then prepare for the younger campers to arrive. Each morning, they host two groups of campers in the garden; each afternoon, they lead two cooking classes in the camp's learning kitchen, constructed from a renovated barn. These gardening teens are in their third and final year of the Lake Valley's Leadership Training program. Many will go on to be camp counselors, mentoring and caring for the campers who are tracing their path from just a few years before.

The garden program, brought to life just three years ago, fits in perfectly with the camp's mission to "develop the abilities of high school students from underserved neighborhoods [of Milwaukee] to teach, lead, and inspire children from the same neighborhoods."

The year three Leaders in Training – known as Garden Assistants or GA's – are under the tutelage of Sara Tedeschi, an experienced Farm to School specialist and garden educator. Even so, Tedeschi remains very much in the background when the younger campers come around. "I literally teach just one cooking session at the beginning of the month the GA's are at camp," she said. "After that, each GA takes a turn being at the head chef's table, teaching the day's menu." The other GA's assist small groups of campers at their cooking stations, monitoring knife skills and guiding students around the garden so they can see the produce they are cooking with. This summer's menu has included stove-top pizzas with sautéed veggies and herbs in place of sauce, breakfast burritos, and homemade butter. The GA's will culminate their summer kitchen experience with an Iron Chef competition using garden produce.



By teaching, the GA's learn both garden and culinary skills at an amazing rate. They come in knowing next to nothing [about gardening and cooking], and they have to learn very quickly from me to turn around and teach back those skills to the younger campers," Tedeschi said. "They learn to take over the classes, so by the end, they are both planning and leading the classes."

The skills that GA's can learn in just one month translate far beyond the garden, the kitchen, or even Lake Valley Camp. GA's who have gone on as counselors have reflected back on their experience in the garden as a place that increased their self-confidence, changed their perspective on nature and food, and

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motivated them to help younger kids learn the same things. One former GA is now employed as a cook at a college in Milwaukee, a job he attributes to his summer experience as a Lake Valley in the garden and kitchen.

For campers of all ages, the garden is a wonderful place to connect, or re-connect, with the natural world. Although Lake Valley Camp is located in Western Wisconsin, campers are all from the city of Milwaukee – the camp works with partner schools who recommend students and families they think would be a good fit – and getting down in the dirt may not come naturally. Garden activities are designed to bring out kids’ natural –if unpracticed - instinct to explore and observe the world around them. The garden is often the entry point for connecting kids with the camp’s 650 acres of woods, water, and fields.

In addition to digging in the soil, meeting the camp chickens, and eating the veggies they grow and harvest, campers find a simple solace in the garden. One former GA stated the following:

“Something that I wish my friends at home can actually get from this is that farming is actually really good at stress relief. Coming into this I had a lot of things on my mind, but...then we weed, and that releases my stress, and then when I plant the seed and it makes the root, and then it makes the stem, and

it makes the leaf, and it makes the flower and then it makes the fruit, you’re just like, wow, I did that.

It just relaxes you, and you smell it, you eat it, and you just like, take all that beauty inside you.”

For more information about Lake Valley Camp, visit www.lakevalleycamp.org.

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