

BYM Camping Program Annual Report

Four Camps: Different Needs, Common Themes

Presented by Brian Massey to Interim Meeting: Fall 2024

Introduction: Different Needs

This was my fourth summer serving in the role of BYM Camping Program Manager, and it felt different. One unexpected consequence of the BYM Camping Program stabilizing over the last few years – as I wrote about in my [2023 Annual Report to Interim Meeting](#) – is that instead of big and sweeping challenges that we had to deal with at all four camps, each camp had their own set of unique successes and challenges, their own strengths and areas of urgent improvement. In 2024 the BYM Camping Program truly felt like it had four distinct camps, with different needs that required different solutions.

As such, my Annual Report this year will look at each individual camp, while also identifying a few common themes. We'll start at the southern end of our range, in Rockbridge County, VA, and drive northward up I-81 from there:

Teen Adventure

of Individual Campers: **83**

of Camper-Weeks: **249**

% of Capacity: **98.8%**

of Staff: **30**

It was a phenomenal summer at Teen Adventure. Led by the experienced and skilled Co-Director team of Rosie Eck and Jesse Austell, TA cultivates a healthy staff culture with high retention, high job satisfaction, and high levels of experience and certification. TA also continues to produce high levels of satisfaction among campers and parents, and has a really strong reputation among campers and families. Despite being a wilderness expedition camp, they continue to manage and mitigate risk in a sustainable and systematic way, keeping campers safe while also supporting them through challenging and growthful experiences.

The main areas for growth and improvement are: 1) Clarify core experience, and increase accessibility to that experience through universal design, without expanding mission beyond what facilities and staffing levels can accommodate; 2) Improve communication to campers, families, and staff – especially those who might be new to BYM Camps – so that everyone has correct expectations for what the program entails, and everyone has sufficient information to arrive fully prepared.

Shiloh

of Individual Campers: **168**

of Camper-Weeks: **369**

% of Capacity: **98.5%**

of Staff: **41**

It was a joyous summer at Shiloh. Under the brilliant leadership of Hope Swank, in her 14th year as Director, Shiloh had a fun, light, and growthful staff culture, with high levels of staff retention. Counselors felt both challenged and supported, and the Deputy Directors Lexi Klein and Elle James were pillars of a robust leadership structure within the camp. This camp staff team created an environment and an experience that campers and families loved, full of fun activities on-site, and rewarding camping trips into the neighboring Shenandoah National Park.

The main areas for growth are: 1) Increasing communication to families during the summer; 2) Improving the drop-off day experience for parents and campers; 3) Supporting campers in their self-care and executive functioning, specifically through clear nighttime / bedtime routines and expectations.

Opequon

of Individual Campers: **113**

of Camper-Weeks: **233**

% of Capacity: **96%**

of Staff: **47**

It was a momentous summer at Opequon. Under the wise leadership of Jared Wood, in his fourth and final summer as Director, Opequon continued to have a vibrant staff culture, with both great retention and intentional space built for newcomers. Staff at Opequon have an exceptionally high level of care for, and commitment to, the camp, and consistently go above and beyond to make the camp successful and ensure that campers have an incredible experience. Despite some challenging moments that were to be expected as we moved from Opequon's original home in Clear Brook, VA to its forever home in Harpers Ferry, WV, the highly motivated and capable staff created positive experiences and a joyous environment for Opequon's campers.

The main areas for growth are: 1) Clarify schedules, routines, and how specific spaces are best used on the new property; 2) Strengthen policies and protocols around camper supervision and camper behavior in this more expansive setting, to ensure that all campers are safe and feel at home; and 3) Increase collaboration and improve communication regarding the physical and material reality of the new camp property as we settle into Opequon's long-term home.

Catoctin

of Individual Campers: **201**

of Camper-Weeks: **464**

% of Capacity: **98%**

of Staff: **57**

It was another successful summer at Catoctin. Under the visionary leadership of Dyresha Harris, Catoctin has cultivated a highly trained and capable staff that care deeply and effectively for their campers. The staff had a strong sense of community, and along with the Leadership Team they created a professional environment that was inclusive and fun and motivated to do good work together. They continue to provide an incredible experience for campers, balancing boundary-pushing overnight wilderness camping trips, wacky and creative fun, and profound spiritual reflection. Campers, families, and staff all expressed satisfaction (and more!) with the summer, and we're confident that we'll have high retention on all fronts.

The main areas for growth and improvement are: 1) Increase counselor and staff presence around camp, especially at key times and in key areas, to identify and stop bullying and other negative social experiences; 2) Improve kitchen operations and the integration of the kitchen with the rest of the camp, to achieve the end goal of more and better food and more positive work experiences; and 3) Diversify programmatic offerings, both in camp and on trips, so that all campers have a bit more choice in the level of challenge they get to engage in.

Conclusion: Common Themes

While each camp had its own unique story in 2024, and its own distinct needs as we head toward 2025, there were common themes across the entire program. First, there is increased pressure on the physical realities of our camps – the buildings, the infrastructure, the amenities, the land and forest – that comes from a changing climate. Heat waves, droughts, floods, damaging storms, invasive species, and more are all our new realities. We must adapt and invest accordingly. If not, our properties will become unsafe, and unappealing to camp families.

Second, there is the need to – at every level of the organization – acknowledge the changing expectations from campers, families, and staff. We may not always like these cultural and societal changes, but we will become a diminished and irrelevant program if we do not validate, honor, and meet the changing expectations around: communication, how much we pay, how much we cost, facilities & amenities, etc. Where something is not central to our mission, we need to be open to changing it. Where something *is* central to our mission, we must be better at framing and explaining those aspects of our program and property to campers, families, and staff.