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Camp inspired me in a way school couldn't Farm and Wilderness

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Farm and Wilderness, located in Plymouth, offers three day camp sessions for 4- to 10-year-olds, and five overnight camp sessions for 9- to 17-year-olds. From late June to mid-August, the camp serves about 800 boys and girls. There are a few openings. For more information, call 422-3761, or e-mail fandw@fandw.org.

I was an unremarkable student. I was the boy sitting one seat from the back wall, perpetually lost in a mess of thought or scribbling frantically in a spiral notebook. The student that teachers genuinely enjoyed having in class but found themselves defining as "average" at the close of each term.

Growing up in the little town of Fairfield, Iowa, classrooms rarely seemed more than a place I had to be. I was distracted by my flourishing eighth grade social life. In high school, I was torn between my skateboard and the search for self-definition. I was just another tuned out and turned off kid.

But, nearly as quickly as each school year began, it ended - and I headed to Vermont and a summer camp called Farm and Wilderness in Plymouth, where the apathy of the previous year immediately faded and for two months I came alive.

Along trails through the Green Mountains and on the current of the Connecticut River I found challenge and inspiration. Around the blaze of the weekly "counsel fire" and on the long grasses of the soccer field I found play, laughter and song. In simple wooden cabins and during the silence of Quaker Meeting I found stillness, community and lifelong friendships. And in the 10 summers I spent as both camper and counselor, I found myself.

Camp inspired me in a way that school never could. It gave me a

passion for learning and a zeal for adventure that I was unable to find confined at a school desk. For me, the traditional classroom was limited by its walls and ticking clock, but on the trails that we walked from Upper Lodge to Waterfront, I found a classroom without boundaries and learning without limits.

When I graduated from college, I stepped away from my summers in the Plymouth valley and spent the next 12 years teaching middle school and outdoor education in suburban Maryland.

As a teacher, I created a supportive classroom in which children could speak their minds, express unpopular ideas, step beyond their intellectual boundaries and work with new people. In this way, they learned how to fly or fall and grow. I tried to create an environment that reflected the creativity and energy of the students, and I encouraged the laughter and curiosity so central to childhood. In my dual role as classroom teacher and outdoor leader, I challenged my students to search outside the walls and to look elsewhere for opportunities to learn, lead, explore and experience.

There is no better place to find these opportunities than at summer camp. Any adult working directly with children has a powerful ability to invite investigation and stimulate curiosity and an excitement for life. But as camp counselors, we are uniquely able to help campers immerse themselves in an experience, allowing them to find their own meaning and to make their own specific contributions. Campers are encouraged to take safe risks and are shown that in both triumph and failure they will be supported. They learn that each individual plays an important role, and they come to understand their own value and the value of others.

As a camper I had experiences and gained skills I could not obtain during the school year. I harvested vegetables in August that I planted at the start of the summer and savored fudge made from the milk from our camp goats. I was rewarded with incredible sunsets from atop summits that had once seemed too daunting to climb. I joined a group that spent a week on the dairy farm of a struggling Vermont family, helping them catch up on much-needed work after a tough season. And, in one of the most profound experiences of my life, I helped renovate the playroom at a local women's shelter for victims of domestic abuse. These were experiences that I wasn't able to find within the limited hours of a school day and each required the commitment and dedication of my camp counselors.

Over a decade later, I have returned to the Plymouth valley as the director of Timberlake, one of six Farm and Wilderness Foundation camps.

So much of who I am I credit to summers spent at this camp. Now I can reach out to the boy in the last row who is closing his eyes to the world around him and shutting his ears to the voice inside. And when we hike together to the summit and paddle into the wind, I will help him discover a part of himself that he might not realize in a classroom, and share experiences he might not find anywhere else.

Chris Lord is the director of the Timberlake program at Farm and Wilderness Camps in Plymouth, a Farm and Wilderness alumnus and a parent of a Farm and Wilderness camper.

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