



Global Camps Africa

Empowering Children For An AIDS-Free Tomorrow

ACA Spring Leadership Conference April 2011

Camp Is Not a Soft Drink!

Some American exports translate easily—the taste of a sugary cola or the thrill of a high-powered action movie doesn't need much explanation. But what about camp? For those of us already convinced of camp's power to effect change, what do we do when no one in a city of four million people has experienced camp?

Learn how camp has become a vital means for personal and social transformation in South Africa. A careful blend of pure fun and meaningful education gives at-risk children a needed release as well as greater self-esteem and direction.

Good morning! What an incredible thrill to stand before you as what I think of as the stuffing between the premium slices of bread, Michael Brandwein and Bob Ditter. I am deeply honored and humbled by the association with them and with all of you. Special thanks to Dot Mains, one of our earliest volunteers at Camp Sizanani in South Africa, who extended the invitation for me to speak here. And to Lupine and the California office under Michelle, thanks for the professionalism with which you have established this very impressive conference.

In fact, my entire experience in Africa has humbled me enormously. Like the word, "transformation," which I also never really experienced, humbled is one where the true experience of the term escaped me.

I have spent almost my entire camp career with a single, private, boys camp in Maine. It has been a wonderful life and I loved every minute of it—like those of you who have directed a camp, that has been my memory looking back, but I also remember the panic when enrollment was down and costs were not; when counselors were not yet hired and committed but the start of staff training was; when a parent calling from a different time zone would call, the power was out, and there was an emergency call from the infirmary—all in the middle of the night.

You can fill in your own scenarios.

But, I still got to swim, hang out with campers and counselors, play tennis, volleyball, and softball, meet interesting people and come to stimulating conferences

My transition to a different camp scene was gradual but sudden. My wonderful wife, Lynn, and I were products of the Kennedy years and went into the Peace Corps following graduate school. We had to miss graduation so we could arrive to Peace Corps training on time.

While in Ethiopia for two years, the opportunity came in the way of a request from the Ethiopian government, to start a residential camp. I accepted and thus began the journey to today.

Populating the camp of 60 (and then, 75, the second year) was not an easy task. While we charged nothing, people were suspicious of us as foreigners and wary of sending their children for two weeks to something they knew nothing about and were unclear as to the purpose.

We got our 60 boys (my experience was just with boys so I went the easy route. Lynn's work was with orphans with physical disabilities and some of them came. I worked with lawyers and some of their children came. Most of the Peace Corps volunteers worked in schools and some of their students came. We also had a couple of American and British kids from their respective embassies.

We slept in pup tents, dug pit latrines, cooked over an open fire, sometimes in the rain, and swam in the only lake in Ethiopia known to be disease-free.

The program was one that would sound familiar to most of you and terrifyingly identical to anyone who had spent time at Camp Winnebago, my old camp. Even the goodnight song was the same, with the words "Camp Langano" substituted for "Winnebago."

Our goal was to break down ethnic and tribal prejudices so boys could see that these were artificial separations. It worked and was beautiful to see the boy from the British embassy with his arm around a child from the orphanage walking back to their tent.

But all these idealistic ventures had to end for now and we went back to the US with our first-born son, Andy, who was born in Addis Ababa and who attended camp when he was 4 months old, living in a tent, albeit a larger one than the pup tents of year 1.

I inherited Camp Winnebago after my father's death in 1974 and owned and operated it for 30 years. I always had in my mind that I would want to return to Africa to start camps. The kids were naturals and the counselors were responsive and loved what they learned and did.

After raising 3 children and paying that final tuition bill, I realized that I was continuing to talk about what I would do after I had more discretionary time, as if this were still way in the future. At some point in the 90s, I decided if I were going to go back to Africa, I needed to do it while I still had my health and energy.

There is an Irish saying that relates to throwing your hat over the wall in order to get yourself in action. If you throw it over, you have to go over the wall to get it.

The first wall was telling others that this is what I was going to do. The second wall was planning a trip to Africa to look for a local partner to work with. The third wall was going for a month and meeting with people from organizations in Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa. The fourth was committing to work with an organization and planning the first camp.

Each wall was easier than the one before had been.

There was one part of the camp program that was markedly different to the Ethiopian experience of Camp Langano. HIV/AIDS had taken over the continent of Africa and particularly in the countries where I was traveling and I wanted to see if camp might have some impact on that pandemic.

I incorporated Global Camps Africa as a non-profit corporation in the U.S. The group I partnered with is in South Africa and does psychosocial counseling. HIVSA, HIV South Africa, sees some 14,000 HIV+ patients and their families in the course of the year, teaches home-based care in conjunction with Johnson & Johnson and has a marvelous life skills program developed with financial assistance from the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

They wanted to start a camp, and had been rejected for the preceding two years by the UN and Save the Children because they hadn't done an adequate needs assessment study and other such pre-funding requirements.

In retrospect, I felt like the near-sighted Mr. Magoo happily unaware, stumbling in to the construction zone and, ignorant of debris and beams falling, cheerily saying, "Want to start a camp?"

We met at the beginning and then, again, at the end of my 30 days in Africa, concluding that we could have a camp ready to go 6 months later. This was a major leap of faith, as we had no money and no camp facility. The other leap of faith was our assumption that camp would work. It's one thing to have a pleasant trip and meet a lot of nice people, but were South African children like Ethiopian children and could money be raised?

It's another to conclude that a camp will succeed. Even though it was just 8 years ago, I have no idea what was going through my mind. I must have concluded that HIVSA knew what they were doing and would not be going into this without considerable preparedness and research. I don't think I ever had a sense of doubt, but, in looking back, do not know why.

We chose a site for our pilot project of 100 campers, but couldn't have our staff training at the site, as they were a Christian site and closed for Christmas week, the week we had staff training. They arranged for us to be at a nearby site, which we liked so much that we went there for our second camp and have been there for most of our 38 camp sessions.

It was difficult to convince families to let their children attend our first camp. They are not used to children leaving home with strangers and didn't know what to expect. Only later did I learn that abuse of children by adult supervisors is a constant problem.

We told them that we would be having fun while teaching their children about life skills. This can be a catch-all term, but in the South African context, it usually includes HIV/AIDS and sexuality, topics that are taboo for discussion in most South African homes. The key reassurance for families was the HIVSA endorsement.

One of the humbling parts of the effort to get started was the realization of how much I didn't know and hadn't thought of in getting things started. The very basics of camp. What time do you wake up? How long are the periods? How many periods? Which would be the most effective activities? What kind of training would we need to bring South Africans, who had never been to camp, up to our standards?

The first thing I did that was brilliant was introduce myself to Michael Brandwein. I had known Michael over the years from conferences, but had no intimate relationship. I remember, almost apologetically going up to him and explaining what I was planning and our need for an initial staff training with American volunteers and South African rookie staff and could he consider doing it-and, oh yes, we could pay his air fare but could not pay him anything. And he said, "YES."

In what I learned was Michael's fashion, he plunged in. He could come only for three days of the staff training, but what an impact! They are still talking about it and people who have long gone on to other jobs still ask about Michael, his balloons, his rubber duck, his beach balls, his magic, and his caring. Boy, did he make me look good!

That's when I also realized we had no camp songs to teach. So, Michael creates a camp song. He is amazing and talented, but he cares so much both for what he is doing and for the people he is doing it for. Breathtaking and an honor to be around such a presence.

He never saw a camper, yet look at his book, "Training Terrific Staff." In volume 1 you will see photos on the front and back of our staff members going through that initial staff training and an introduction that refers glowingly to the program. In volume 2, there are photos on the cover as well. Talk about making a difference—we had a powerful, unified staff that was the equal of any I had ever worked with in their love, care, and concern for children and their ability to stay with the campers, handling the unique issue of every camper being away for the first time and the attendant issues.

A little more about the country: South Africa was governed by Nelson Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, for 8 years, from June 1999 to September 2008. During his term, the South African economy grew at a healthy 4.5% and his scholarly bearing and revolutionary credentials gave a comforting image to South Africans.

At the same time, his nearly two terms were marked by worldwide derision of his HIV/AIDS policy. South Africa became the laughingstock of the world with his belief and that of his health minister, derisively called, "Dr. Beetroot," that HIV did not lead to AIDS and could be warded off by natural remedies, such as beetroot and garlic.

The problem was not just that he believed this, but that millions of South Africans were confused and denied themselves treatment by which their immune compromised systems could have been stabilized with anti-retroviral medication, or ARVs.

On my basic level of involvement, the camp program was not affected by this as we did not ask for government assistance, but raised all our money privately, much of it through camps and the camp community in the U.S. and Canada.

The situation has changed so much that I was pleasantly surprised when the current health attaché to the South Africa embassy paid her own way to attend our

fundraiser in Reston, Virginia, last April. I have become good friends with her and she has become a strong advocate for us.

It's hard to say why we were seen as anything other than a non-political institution aiming to help South African children and youth. But the air was so charged with the AIDS controversy that politicians had a lot at stake defending their positions. Why all the fuss?

All we do is have a 7-period camp program filled mostly with activities that sound familiar to all of us—swimming, sports, arts and crafts, adventure (low ropes), and theater. Our other two activities are nutrition and life skills, slightly off the beaten path but not too far out.

The point is that we are a life skills camp and teach what have become known as level 2 skills in all activities, except, perhaps, life skills and nutrition, where we teach that the content is the message. In the others, the content is the process for gaining the level 2 skills of teamwork, communication, persistence, self-expressions, or others.

We do 3 things a little different from camps in the U.S.

- (1) Life Skills is a key activity and its messages permeate every other activity.
- (2) Campers may come to only one 8-day camp session.
- (3) We have follow-up Kids Clubs that meet every other Saturday as a way to prevent slippage in the message and support where needed.

A brief aside into South Africa—South Africa is the most vibrant and free economy in Africa. South Africa had legally-enforced and overt racial discrimination, called apartheid, a Dutch word meaning separateness, increasingly enforced starting in 1948. Despite being a 20% minority, the whites controlled the government and the private sector. When Lynn and I were Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s, we broke Peace Corps rules and visited South Africa for 10 days just so we could see what it was like.

It was very scary, principally because even then, nearly 30 years before independence, everyone seemed to know that it was only a matter of time before the majority would control and no one could imagine a peaceful transition. I remember reading books, written by whites, showing that black control would be a bloody battle and a financial mess. South Africa would descend into the dark ages and its education and way of life would be irreparably set back.

Nelson Mandela's story is well-known, particularly with his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," and the many movies, most notably perhaps, "Invictus," which focused on then-President Mandela embracing the white South African rugby team as his own, even though it was synonymous with white racism.

The most incredible story about South Africa's revolution was that it was accomplished so peacefully, and that the transition has been done so non-violently. While blacks have replaced whites in many positions, there is a middle class that has kept the country together and relatively honest when countries all around them have had major problems of dictatorship and additional revolution and turmoil.

They are on their third peacefully elected President and no revolution from the left or right has gained traction.

This is Africa, in part. In fact, TIA (this is Africa) is a saying used to explain things that go amiss for no apparent reason. For example, there is the matter of time. Many things run late. Oh well, say the wealthy people waiting for the meeting to start, "TIA," and smile benevolently. We have that with campers and counselors. The bus will be scheduled to leave a central point at 8:30 am and people are still showing up at 9:00 am or later.

TIA is a bit patronizing. Most people rely on public transport and few have their own cars. In Johannesburg and Soweto this takes the form of minivans, called taxis, that go to certain points. In the strange realm of taxi economics, they wait till they are full before starting. Thus, a passenger can arrive way early for an appointment and still be waiting for a taxi to fill up as the appointed hour passes.

What we are doing is not being harsh when someone is late, but upset when they don't call to let us know. But even that can be difficult, although everyone has a cell phone. In high crime areas, it is not advisable to show your phone. Thus, there are ripples beyond ripples.

The first day of our first camp, I was completely flustered and beside myself when the campers arrived by bus and were not the same campers we had registered. About 30% had not come, but had sent siblings, cousins or friends in their place. For some reason, this was so unexpected that it paralyzed me. Fortunately my more flexible wife was there and along with my South African counterpart, who was much less thrown by this, simply organized the campers by age and sorted them into new cabins. It has happened at the start of every one of our 37 camps since then. TIA.

One problem that has proved intractable and has yielded little in results has been HIV. HIV is a condition in humans in which progressive failure of the immune system allows life-threatening opportunistic infections and cancers to thrive. Infection with HIV occurs by the transfer of bodily fluids from an infected to a non-infected person. In South Africa, it is normally transmitted through heterosexual sex or from an infected mother to a baby at birth.

As HIV lingers and persists, without special care and attention, it inevitably leads to AIDS and the body's resistance is further weakened and the patient dies, not of AIDS, but from a disease that is now able to take over and kill the body.

It's not rocket-science to learn these things and it requires a little sex education. We get no giggles or embarrassed smirks when we talk to the campers about these things. They have never heard about it in their homes and they are desperately eager to hear about it from us. It is the first time they have been treated as responsible people in being told how to control their own future. Good health is a motto, but it is not taught. "Condomize," "safe sex," even "my friend with AIDS is still my friend," are all posted on billboards and spoken as though people who know nothing else will know what to do with a condom. As if they know the difference in reality between safe and unsafe sex.

Due to this lack of education, the stigma associated with AIDS is enormous. People are ostracized from their families and communities because they are HIV positive. Husbands will not allow a wife to remain if she is HIV positive, even though he refuses to be tested to see if he is also HIV positive.

Unbelievably in this day and age, there are still many people who believe-sincerely believe despite no proof being offered-that if an HIV infected man has sex with a virgin, he will be cured.

What we do at camp is not to dispel these myths, but discuss them and teach the campers the science of HIV/AIDS. We try to get them at the gut level to assimilate the truth and to make it their own.

Our goal is to have them, when faced with a choice of safe or unsafe sex, to always choose safe sex (or no sex), rather than have it be a discussion or a dilemma at the time.

Camp goes for just 8 days, which usually translates into 6 hours of life skills. What do you choose as the chief stumbling blocks for 11-16 years olds to overcome as they thread their way to a healthy adulthood?

This would make an incredibly interesting discussion on its own.

Given the unenviable position of South Africa being number one in the world in HIV infections-not as a percentage of its 49 million people, but having the most cases, even when measured against China, India, Russia, and the US- it is clear that HIV/AIDS has to be a part of the class. As heterosexual transmission is the overwhelmingly predominant form of transmission between non-infants, clearly we have to teach sex.

In addition, our South African staff and educators have chosen puberty and adolescence, gender bias, abusive behaviors, self-esteem, and drugs, crimes, and alcohol as the pillars of the life skills class.

These are not the only places the campers get life skills messages. As mentioned before, every other class is also about life skills.

In swimming, an activity that has less relevance for these children than any other at camp, it is not about swimming, but about achieving something that you knew – not thought, but knew- you could never do. Talk about persistence, perseverance, achieving out of the box, and the like. These kids are all swimming, albeit some with PFD support, by the end of 8 days. We even had a one-armed girl swim on her own, having opted to take off her PFD.

The other skill areas are about expressiveness and creativity, not theater and arts and crafts; teamwork, cooperation, and communication, not sports and adventure.

We had the wonderful Gwynn Powell, a camp person and a professor at the University of Georgia, join us at our first day camp in late March. She found that, when asked what they wanted to achieve in sports at the beginning of the 8 day camp session, most campers referred to the level one skills of learning games, rules, and how to play. When asked at the end of camp what they learned from sports, the overwhelming majority referred to level 2 skills of teamwork, cooperation, and communication.

We are hopeful that this will be the hallmark of camp. After all, we are training citizens, not soccer players. We would prefer having a world class citizen be a decent soccer player, than a world-class soccer player be just an average citizen.

The campers are usually not HIV positive. At the age we get them, the general HIV rate is between 2-5%. They are considered orphans and vulnerable children, which places them at risk for HIV/AIDS. We sometimes get HIV positive children and some don't survive very long. One boy was so sick at camp that we finally had to send him home to be taken to the hospital. Despite his obvious pain and near sleepless nights

with bone-wracking coughing, he never complained. In fact, his first complaint was when we told him he was going home. All he wanted to do was stay at camp.

Another boy was rushed to the hospital. He was HIV positive and it was feared that he was crashing. The boys in his cabin made him lovely get well cards which we were going to deliver the next day. He returned. It turned out he was allergic to ice cream, which he had had for the first time.

The children who come to camp come from some of the worst economic and social situations. A lot are from what are euphemistically called, "informal settlements," which mean that they are squatters, living in tin and cardboard shacks, having some community water and toilet facility, often tapping dangerously and illegally into electric power lines. These children often get one low-nutrition meal a day and many eat every other day. There is no pride, shame or pity in this.

We will never hear a complaint when meals are late, lines are long, food runs low, electricity goes out, or anything else. They never complain about their situation at home.

The same is true of the abuse they suffer. The campers are the most cheerful, upbeat, positive role models you can imagine. They sing on their way to meals and activities, they sing in the dining room and dance around the dining room, they sing before and after assemblies, but never as a team activity, just as an expression of who they are.

In discussing abuse, one girl raised her hand and asked, wanting to define for herself what abuse might be, "is it abuse if your father has sex with you but gives you \$3?"

The concept of abuse is so foreign and they live with it for so long that they cannot quite get what it is.

We know they are happy at camp. In fact, one girl at our day camp told us that she had been woken up early the second day by her older brother. It turned out that this girl, a 23-year old orphan in 11th grade, had been passed around to many family members who had mistreated her badly, finally ending up with a brother who treated her well. She hadn't smiled in 3 years. When the brother saw her return from her first day at camp and saw how happy she was, he woke her up early to make sure she wasn't late for this activity which brought such happiness to her.

The deputy principal of the school visited one day and asked what kind of special occasion we had orchestrated for him. We said nothing and asked why he thought

so. He said the campers were among his most uncooperative students at school and yet they were behaving so well and cooperating so fully.

He still didn't believe us and he pretended to leave, but went to the second floor where he watched the activities without being seen by the campers, his students. We could see him peeking out to observe, undoubtedly confused by the consistent results.

We also had parents visiting day, one of the good features of having a day camp. One father came, he said, because his son, he said, was an outright liar and the father was going to catch his son in the stories the son had been telling about the wonderful things he had been doing at camp. In this case, the father was delighted to find that his son had not been lying.

We have faced parental shock at every camp. At residential camp it can be more shocking as the parents do not see the camper each night. One family reported that their son was an uncooperative teenager, who left the house at any mention of helping with tasks and didn't return till late at night.

After camp, the family reported, the son asked for a family meeting. He proceeded to say, "I wanted you all to come together because I haven't ever told you this. I love you."

The son now helps at home and is a cooperative member of the family.

The message we get from this is that these children, gangsters, prostitutes, near dropouts without a future, are desperate to find something that will point them in the right direction. We always see the motivation that these campers have to improve themselves and find a better path. Gangsters reform; parolees go straight; prostitutes return to school and become reunited with families. Camp provides for these children what they can't seem to get from school, family, church, or other institutions. You should all be proud at your association with something this powerful. I hope you can have your campers sum up the camp experience with the wisdom that a 14-year old gave me last year when I asked him what he had gotten from camp: his answer-choice. He now had a choice in deciding what to do and whom to hang out with. He found he didn't have to say yes to everything the kids did around him.

People who reflect on what they have done with their lives rarely glory in the time they spent in their office, or in the money they accumulated. The most common highlight of anyone's life achievements, perhaps except for family love, is the feeling that you, as an individual, have made a difference in someone else's life. Not a difference in that you told him a funny story that made him feel better, or that

you gave her a sweater that she really liked, or that you gave a family a meal on thanksgiving, although all of these are nice.

No, the thing that makes life rich, glorious and fulfilling is knowing that you have been a part of transforming a person's life--changing the way he or she approaches life. Sort of like the boy who now knows that he has choices. If we can all transform how the children and adults around us see their lives, we might have contributed significantly to the condition of the world.

So, where do we go from here?

First, we tell the campers and counselors that if they love camp and wish the world could be more like camp, they need bring camp to the world. I give as an example using camp-like games and tricks to cheer people up when they look like they are having a bad day. There is a simple game that always brings a smile: with two people, one says 1, the other says 2, and the first says 3. Then they keep the pattern going until they have it or they don't. The next step is to clap instead of saying 2. This always provokes a smile and the person has improved his/her day.

Second, when I began in 2003, had I been offered the possibility of having had 38 camp sessions for 4,400 children, with 1,000 children attending Kids Clubs regularly, I would have jumped at it.

Now that we are there, I am eager to climb the next mountain. This will involve having our own site with programs operating year round, instead of just 3 a year. We could be working with school groups, have more camp sessions, have mothers and daughters, train more local organizations so they could have their own camps.

The test of sustainable development is not to bring camp in, but to train local organizations to deliver this high-impact experience to their own people.

I invite you to join us. Volunteer to come to South Africa for a 2-week camp session.

Have your camps support a camper.

Talk to your friends and join them in sponsoring a child—for \$500 you can send a child to camp and a year of Kids Clubs. This isn't just nice-it transforms lives and you become part of that.

Let your community know how to change the world, one child at a time.

If you have access to people with money and a desire to fund a cause that truly makes a difference, please let me know and I can meet with them. People with money need reliable, credible organizations to give to.

In acknowledging where we are, we have to credit those who have helped us get there. Among others are my exceptional wife, Lynn, my friend, mentor and hero, Michael Brandwein, the 160 volunteers from 14 countries who have joined our staff for at least one camp session, and the magical South African campers and counselors who make camp fresh, powerful, and emotional camp after camp.