



A conversation with Penny Laitos

Why we come to camp

Penny Laitos was the kind of kid who cried when mom and dad dropped her off at camp and then cried again when they arrived to pick her back up. As a child, Highlands Presbyterian Camp and Retreat Center in Allenspark, Colorado, quickly became a second home to Laitos.

Now, after studying speech communications and leadership at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, she is the program director for John Knox Center, a Presbyterian camp and conference center nestled in the rolling hills of east Tennessee with miles of lake-front shoreline. This camp is, in fact, the sixth where Laitos has worked. And she does it, she says, because she “fell in love with the people.” Laitos chatted with Patrick Heery, editor of *Presbyterians Today*.

What keeps bringing you back to camp?

I think I am the person I am today because of people who came alongside me, supported me, encouraged me—and it’s remarkable how many of those people came from camps and conference centers. Do you know that I can still tell you the names of some of my camp counselors when I was six or seven years old? I think a part of me wants to give that back.

Camp offers an even playing field. When you’re canoeing a river, counting stars, or hiking, it doesn’t matter how many degrees you have; it matters that you care about the person beside you. Kids don’t come to camp because I run an amazing program or because I find amazing deals on kayaks. Kids come to camp

because they live in a world where they are starved for actual relationships and sometimes just for the chance to be seen and loved. And I get to be a part of creating that community.

What camp moments stick with you the most?

Definitely the cabin time with girls: the wisdom that is shared in those circles; the giggles at two o’clock in the morning. And then watching those girls grow up, go into ministry, go into camp ministry, become doctors or teachers, become smarter than I could ever hope to be—and all because they were loved.

It’s amazing what you can do when you know you are loved.

When did you realize this was your calling?

After I graduated from college, I came back to volunteer at a camp. I figured I would bide my time over the summer, have some fun, and then grow up after that. But then the program director told me that it looked like I really loved what I was doing. More than that, he said, I was good at it. He said it was rare for someone to be good at what they most love doing and that maybe I should pay attention.

How are you doing ministry at John Knox?

It starts with relationships. John Knox Center really is a place “where everybody knows your name.” Before campers ever arrive, the staff sit down and share what we know about them. Once they get here, counselors are sure to have at least one

intentional conversation with each kid in their cabin.

With older youth, we talk about what it means to be “called” and

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what’s going to happen in their lives after they graduate high school. Recently, for one youth, a fun one-hour hike in the woods became a realization that God has created something amazing and that he wants to be a part of preserving it. So he’s going to go into forest ecology.

Environmental education is really big here. And when you get a group of inner-city kids to go for a hike at night in the woods, to hold a snake, to see the stars, to work together, some pretty powerful lessons are learned. The same is true for our family camps. Families live in a world where they are lucky to get all four people just to sit down around a table to eat a meal together without distraction. At camp, that happens all the time, and families grow closer.