

Jesse's Camp Diaries, 2017

From the very first meeting with City Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Affairs (PRNA) staff, it was obvious that this year's Jesse's camps would be the best yet. With our previous years of experience to guide us, adding our third location seemed to happen by magic. My great thanks to Ashley Edwards, PRNA director, Bobby Sparks, parks supervisor, Aeshah Jefferson McQueen of Walker Ford, Robin McKay of LeVerne Payne, and Connie Williams of Jack McLean. They created an amazing calendar of events for the full spring break week plus teacher planning day. They were enthusiastic with lots of ideas, and had already talked over how each site would have their own special events as well as some events when all 130 excited campers would be together.

On day 1, Jerry Walls, a naturalist and reptile specialist from Pensacola, gave an amazing presentation on alligators and snakes. His company *Amazing Animals*, is a traveling education program which introduces the audience to the fascinating world of animals in an upbeat, fun, educational and interactive way. Imagine all of our astonishment to see his critters! (Pictures of Jerry and 2 year old gator.)



Returning were some beloved speakers/presenters. Major Bennett (ret. LCSO) brought Master Deputy Curtis Barnes, recruiter from the Orange County Sheriff's Office, to join him. Their presentation was on mindful living, otherwise known as straight talk on making your family proud of you, being the best you can be, and making good decisions and wise choices. Thank you, Major Bennett, for your wisdom. (Picture of Major Bennett, Master Deputy Barnes, and youngsters.)



Our thanks to Mayor, Andrew Gillum, for returning to visit with our youngsters. His spending time listening to our young folks is inspirational and meaningful to them.

Tom Taylor, resplendent in new hot chili pepper hat, taught all our campers cooperative games. Play, have fun, we all win! Thank you, Tom, for your kind, generous and playful spirit!



Master Murphy of the Dragon's Den, taught several Taekwando classes at the LeVerne Payne Center. We appreciate you so much, Master Murphy, for teaching our campers the fine art of kickboxing.

There were so many field trips all week with trips to the St. Marks Lighthouse, the world class FSU Magnet Lab, the Bradfordville Petting Zoo, and Tom Brown Park. Because of strong community relationships and a desire to make this a fabulous week for the children, some community groups (see the list below) sponsored trips for our campers to go to the Sky Zone trampoline center, the IMAX theatre, and the Fun Station. I was completely delighted to learn that the LeVerne Payne group would get to travel to the Jacksonville Zoo. This was due to the generosity of FSU's Wesley Foundation which tutors youngsters at LeVerne Payne throughout the year. Great thanks to all who made these excellent adventures possible.

At the beginning of the week, I was given a Jesse Correia Spring Break tee shirt that the campers going to the Jax Zoo would wear for easy identification.



Special guests from the Copy Cats Paint Studio were on hand to teach art classes at the Jack McLean center. McLean's group also had a field trip to the Lafayette Community Center for a morning of painting. This is the first year we made use of another of the City's recreation centers for one of our programs. We appreciate staff's time in teaching our campers painting (she is amazing!).

In addition to all of that, there were new programs. It seems to me that in what feels like turbulent times we need to focus on peace and respect. This project was one to create awareness... and art! The campers were asked to draw a picture of what peace means to them. They each talked about their picture, and all the pictures were made into a quilt. Thank you Tom Taylor for writing the instructions for this project, and thank you to the staff for creating a new opportunity for our youngsters.



Along the theme of peace, dear friend, poet and writer, Katya Sabaroff Taylor, (whose new book on writing with inmates called *Prison Wisdom* is due out this summer), spent the morning teaching haiku poetry and acrostic poems. Our poems were added to the peace quilts. Our group peace acrostic poem is this:

Playful
Energetic
Achievement
Creating
Everyone's dream

Some of the peace haikus are these:

Peace is family
Family makes it awesome
I have a good time

Peace is fun when I
Play with family and friends
Peace is peaceful me

When all were gathered for the carnival, I was given the opportunity to say something to all the campers about peace and why it was our focus this year. I shared with them my belief that we each know what creates peace for us. It is

our job, their job, to make sure they spread peace in family and school and community. I trust they will.

At the end of the week I was presented with handmade thank you notes which obviously brought tears to my eyes. To read what these youngsters wrote in their own unique way is precious. Read on

“It was the best day of my life and we had lots of fun. Thank you for that!”

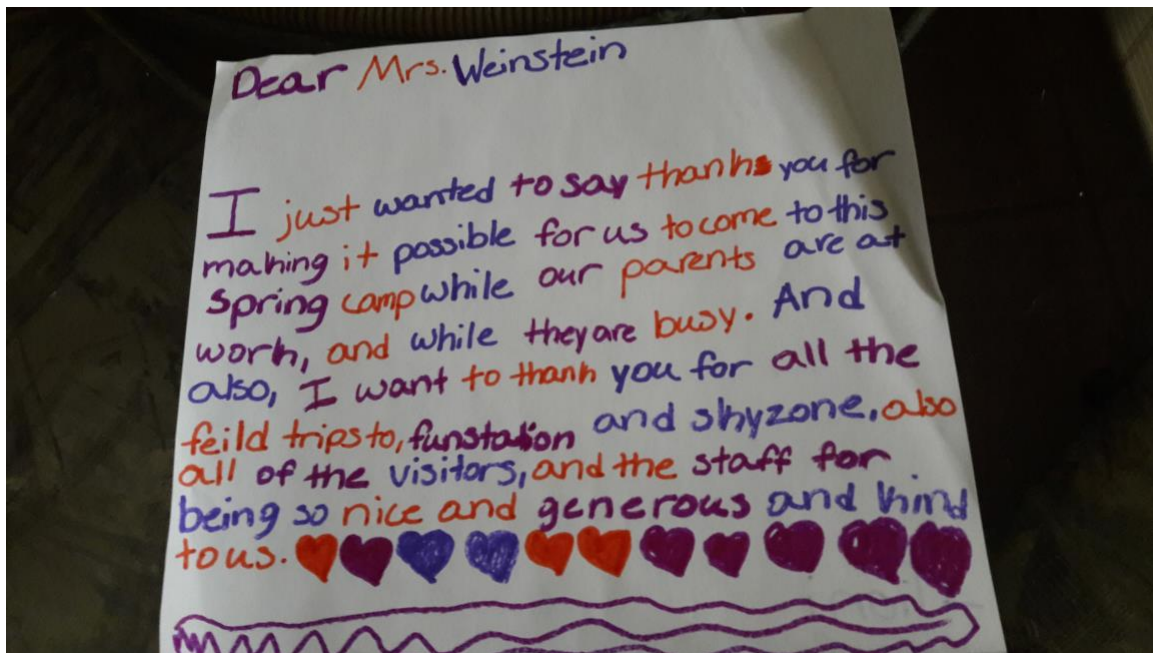
“I love camp. I love camp so much that I would put my kids in here.”

“I had a great time especially when we went to Jacksonville. Thank you for camp.”

“Thank you for everything. You provided a lot of things and we got to do things I never did before. Thank you very much.”

“Thank you for letting us come. We appreciate and we love you.”

“I just wanted to say thank you for making it possible for us to come to this spring camp while our parents are at work and while they are busy. And also, I want to thank you for all the field trips and all the visitors, and the staff for being so nice and generous and kind to us.”



In addition to all of this, Sally Butzin, a local educator who is on the advisory board for PRNA, wrote a beautiful article about Jesse's camps which was published in our local Tallahassee Democrat. This was shared with many on facebook and has received quite a large response. Thank you to Sally, as well, for her generous donation of her book, *Best Buddies Birthdays*, a book of wonderful games for children to play. There is now a book at all 3 of our camp locations.

What an incredible experience this was! I feel so fortunate for Ashley Edwards, director of PRNA, Bobby, Aeshah, Robin, and Connie and their amazing staff. My thanks to all for creating an amazing and wonderful week for our campers! Thanks also go to those in our community who supported Jesse's camps in many ways. They are:

Sam's Wholesale Club
Second Harvest of the Big Bend
Dragons Den Taekwondo
Dr. P of FAMU Recreate & Leisure Class (Tennis & games)
Professor Turnquest FAMU Criminal Justice (Carnival Items)

Trips:

- Wesley Foundation FSU (tee shirts and trip to Jacksonville zoo)
- Inspire Group (Fun Station)
- Big Bend City Joint Council (Sky Zone)
- Walker Ford Advisory Board (Challenger Learning Center –Imax)

Cook Lunch:

- Daughters of Nazarene
- Sister With A Purpose
- Noble Lady Holmes
- Inspire Group

As I think back on how spectacular this camp was, I am touched by the generosity and caring spirit of so many. All who participated enjoyed themselves and that goes for staff, too. It was obvious how much love they put into what they do everyday. Our community is fortunate for them!

It goes without saying but I want to emphasize my huge thanks to each of you for your love, support, and encouragement in making this camp possible. It never occurred to me when the City and I first began exploring possibilities that we would create something as meaningful as we have. I hope you each give yourself credit for what we have done together. I could never have done this alone.

Thank you for helping me honor my beautiful son Jesse's life in such a happy and wonderful way. He'd think this was awesome!

With love and gratitude
Martha Weinstein
Jesse's Mom