

## Camp Colley

As summer camps go, this one is relatively young, but its mission is the same as so many others: to introduce children to the beauty and mysteries of nature and wilderness. What's different about this camp is that it's geared toward kids from underserved communities.

**KELLY VAUGHN**

For so many American children, a pilgrimage to summer camp is a rite of passage. The smell of the campfire; the gooey, sticky sweetness of roasted marshmallows; and making new friends under a blanket of stars, far removed from screens, school and the stresses of everyday kid-dom. But not every child has that opportunity. And that's something Camp Colley hopes to change.

Established in 1999 and operating continually ever since, the camp — named for James Colley, the longtime leader of Phoenix's parks and recreation programs, and located near Happy Jack on the Mogollon Rim — enables children from underserved communities in the Phoenix area to experience the beauty and mysteries of nature and wilderness, often for the first time in their lives.

"We see so much change happen when these kids step off the bus and sit in a circle out in the wilderness for the first time," says Richard Berg, executive director of the Camp Colley Foundation, which oversees the funding and operation of the camp. "Initially, there's a genuine discomfort, but by the end of the week, the kids are rolling around in the grass. It's a wonderful

thing — to watch them transition, open up and build an affinity for nature."

Initially, the city of Phoenix funded and operated the program, which is geared toward students ages 8 to 14. The foundation's role was to raise funds for camp improvements and projects such as building a dining hall and other structures. Because of city budget cuts in 2008, the foundation stepped in to cover operating expenses while the city continued to physically operate the camp. Since then, the foundation has taken over operations as well, relying on support from private and corporate sponsors and a staff of 26 people from across the country. To date, more than 4,000 children have attended Camp Colley for free, through scholarships provided by the foundation.

The COVID-19 pandemic scrapped in-person camp for 2020, but campers were treated to an online curriculum instead. And the foundation is already looking forward to this summer.

"For most of our campers, this will be the first time they'll spend a few nights away from home," Berg says. "The hope is that the experience expands their world-

view. The children are exposed to horses, to canoes, to a ropes course. Camp pushes them to step outside of their comfort zone and really embrace being a kid. There's a lot of positive impact from the social and emotional perspectives, and so many benefits to environmental learning."

Indeed, studies by the Children and Nature Network have suggested that school-age children who experience an outdoors education often see increased test scores and enhanced attendance, attentiveness and achievement. While those things aren't



**ABOVE:** Children from the Phoenix area have been enjoying nature at Camp Colley since 1999.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The ponderosa pines of the Mogollon Rim shade one of the camp's buildings at sunrise.

directly related to classes held outdoors, there's no doubt that spending five days in nature — beginning in 2021, Camp Colley will offer nine five-day sessions during the summer — has holistic benefit for children. Some reports also indicate an alleviation of symptoms of anxiety and ADHD.

"The kids learn to care about the environment, too," Berg says. "They learn that they need to do right by the

environment and help protect it."

Last fall, Camp Colley expanded beyond summer programming to offer a monthly program on the third Thursday of every month. If students complete six of the eight sessions, they're offered a complimentary spot in summer camp. But the camp is also open to children who don't attend those sessions.

"If people have a child or a niece or nephew or a friend's child that they think might be interested in getting out and learning to love the environment, we have community enrollment, too," Berg says. "Not only will that benefit their own loved one, but it might have a ripple effect on other children as well."

**MOGOLLON RIM** Camp Colley, 602-262-4872, campcolley.org