

Around the Fire

STORIES FROM BEAR CREEK CAMP

SUMMER 2025

Camp Stats:



561

Overnight
Campers



182

Nature
Day Campers



36

Summer
Camp Staffers



158

Congregations
represented
(including 93 ELCA
congregations)

- 96% of campers enjoyed the camp experience;
- 93% of campers appreciated experience with nature;
- 94% felt supported and happy at camp;
- 80% got out of their comfort zone and tried new things;
- 91% felt connected with others at camp;
- 98% plan to attend camp in the future



The Connections That Make Camp Come to Life!

As one of 112 Lutheran Outdoor Ministries across the country, Bear Creek Camp has direct partnership with two ELCA synods: Northeastern and Southeastern Pennsylvania. These partnerships represent connection to 388 Lutheran congregations across the Eastern Pennsylvania region. While Bear Creek Camp operates as an independent non-profit, we are grateful for these partnerships and the ways that campers, summer staff, families, and guest groups benefit throughout the year.

NEPA Synod Summer Involvement:

As part of pre-camp training for summer camp staff, a service of commissioning is held. This worship service invites board members, alumni, and synod leadership to join with staff in celebrating the call to ministry that they are undertaking for the next few months. This summer, **Bishop Christopher deForest**, led the service and held a time with the staff to answer their questions about the church and encourage their work's impact on congregations and the world beyond the red dirt road.



Stacey Burke is the NEPA Synod Communications & Growing Young Coordinator. She also serves as the NEPA synod representative to the BCC Board of Directors. Stacey visited camp multiple times over the summer to connect with and support the volunteer chaplains from NEPA synod congregations.



NEPA SYNOD
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod

SEPA Synod Summer Involvement:

For over a decade, **Philly Connect** has been a program to encourage participation from Center City Philadelphia churches, by subsidizing the cost of camp and having intentional opportunities for summer staff to connect with congregations on a Sunday during staff training. The financial costs of this program have been supported by campership donations from individuals and congregations. For this past summer, **Bishop Bryan Penman** and SEPA synod took on the initiative of expanding the opportunities of the program to include all campers from all congregations in two synod conferences – Northeast/ Northwest and Central Philadelphia. With this partnership, we are excited to focus our energies on expanding the impact and look to have even more families have access to camp than ever before.



**Southeastern
Pennsylvania Synod**

DONOR PROFILE:

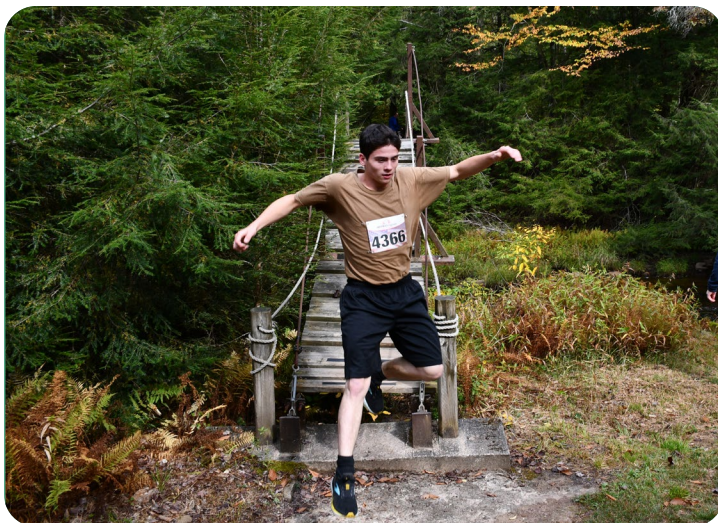
A Neighbor with Deep Connections – *and Impact!*

The first time that Mike Harostock was at Bear Creek Camp, he was a student at Wilkes-Barre Academy, which every year brings their fifth through eighth grade students to camp for three days of an overnight retreat filled with environmental education sessions and camp activities like the lake and high ropes. For Mike, this was the first time he ever spent the night away from family.

“I had my hiking boots and my canteen and I remember that we did this exercise where the whole class stood on two boards with rope handles and we had to move across the field. At the time, it was a fun activity, but now I realize we were learning about how leaders emerge and communication happens. It’s not teaching and we’re going to tell you what to learn, it was an experience and then we internalized lessons from the experience.”

From Neighbor to Board Member

Fast forward a few years and now Mike and his family live in Bear Creek Village and continue to support BCC as next door neighbors, through Mike’s service on the Board of Directors, and as sponsors and organizers of the latest iteration of the Through the Woods Trail Run. “One of my values is we need to be involved in our local communities and BCC is in my backyard. Joining the board, I was surprised that we have so many campers and families coming from two, three hours away, and yet there are still people in our local area who don’t know anything about BCC.”



2025 Through the Woods 5K winner, John Doyle, who finished the race in an impressive 22 minutes and 40 seconds.

When the opportunity arose to host a trail run as a fundraiser and community event, Mike jumped at the possibilities.

“I had the chance to run the 5k in 2018 and it was the perfect Bear Creek day. I know that we have the best possible venue for a trail run in the area and it’s important for us to have opportunities to invite everyone to come here and see Camp.”



Through the Woods 5K

The 2025 edition of the Through the Woods 5k had over 75 runners, walkers, hikers, and volunteers for a day filled with competition, community, and nature exploration – a perfect Bear Creek Camp day. Mike recalled his favorite moment of race day, “Watching as everyone was coming to camp in the morning and heading into the pavilion to register and you would see these moments of community and fellowship; board members, alumni, current campers, staff, and local folks coming together and then hearing ‘hey, I remember you!’ or ‘wow, this place is amazing!’”

For Mike, his involvement with Bear Creek Camp is about making lasting impacts both on the BCC community and in our local community. “It’s important for young people to be involved locally and we have to have spaces like camp where they can participate in outdoor experiences and even possibly grow into working and giving back. For everyone who comes to camp I see this place as offering a way to get back into balance, it’s a place where people can feel like they’re coming home and feel that the world is okay.”

We are grateful to Mike, the BCC Board of Directors, BCC Staff, race participants and our many generous sponsors of the 2025 Through the Woods 5k. Together we raised over \$8,000 in support of camperships!

Save the date!
2026 Through the Woods 5k
SEPTEMBER 26, 2026

CAMPER SPOTLIGHT!



Isaiah Johnson has been a Bear Creek camper for four summers. His family learned about BCC from family members and their home congregation, Trinity Lutheran in Kutztown.

Isaiah's recent favorite memories of camp involve the ropes course. "I love being on the high ropes course because when you're up there, you're in control and it's nice to know I can do it without worrying about getting hurt."

For Isaiah, camp has always been a place where he's felt that he can be himself. "The first time I went to camp, it was a bunch of the kids' first times, and it was also my counselor's first week and so we kind of made mistakes together. And at camp you don't get in trouble for mistakes, they teach you how to do it better and in a different way than what you did before."

Isaiah's mom, Nicole, has seen impacts in his life beyond camp.

"From a parent perspective, he's creating friendships, he's building independence away from home when mom and dad aren't there, and it's important to have that chance to be outside and doing things disconnected from electronics. He's also engaged at church and as he begins confirmation, I can see that he's relating back to things he learned at camp."

While still with many camper years to go, Isaiah dreams of being on summer staff and that his younger sister will be a camper and his step sister will be working along side of him!

"Camp is just a wonderful place, it's really fun, and I think everybody should go there at least once in their life."



Isaiah Johnson

A STAFFER'S STORY:

Celebrating (and Seeing!) Our Gifts

Marco Natali-Rude's history with Bear Creek Camp starts long before he made the decision to join summer staff this past year. A BCC camper for a number of years, Marco's dad Jim was also on summer staff in the 1980's. "They were the best years of his life and he got me into camp early and I really enjoyed it. I always like the dance and thought that was so much fun. All my friends always just wanted to play football in the Upper A, but I loved to dance."



Marco Natali-Rude

After many years as a camper, Marco went to college for music production, and while his love of music was still there, he was struggling to find his fit. "Music's really cool and I love it. I'm always going to love music, but as I was in college trying to make it my career, I was getting burnt out. I realized I was spending way too much time inside and I just felt like I was wasting my early 20s away and I needed to do something active. I remembered how much I loved camp and just decided to apply."

"When I got to camp, I realized what I think I already knew about myself, but that I'm good at making connections and building relationships. And I loved working with campers and how they could be brutally honest and tell you exactly how they feel and often times that was just them telling me how much they cared and appreciated what I was doing."

"My first cabin, there was a camper, Isaiah, who was young in his age group and working so hard to fit in and it took a little bit extra for me to make sure he was always included and having a good time. On the last day, our quest group went to the Unless Rock and read the Lorax which was pretty cool and then on the way back to camp we were walking and he says to me 'Marco, I think you'd be a good therapist.' And that really struck me, like it was so cool and very beautiful, and I still get emotional, it just felt so good to hear that I made an impact."

"And the rest of the summer that started to become a trend. I felt like I mattered. It was just so cool to be able to help out like that because I always try to. I can be the funny guy and I love being that, but deep down I really do care. So when I went back to college this year, I switched my major to psychology. And maybe I will be a therapist or a social worker, but making that switch has been one of the best decision I've made and those classes are my favorite I've taken and it's awesome and I'm just so happy and it feels like I now know exactly what I want to do and I'm on the right path."



"I didn't realize it at the time, but camp for me was always about being myself. When I would get here, it was kind of an escape and I was able to dance around and have fun. And now that I'm working here, I see that in campers. Like some start out kind of shy at first and then once they get comfortable they are able to truly express themselves. I've noticed for myself now that I'm back at college that I'm seeking out friends that are more like my camp friends. Camp is such an important place for everyone to have a place where they can be themselves."



BEAR CREEK CAMP

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 Bear Creek Camp  @bearcreekcamp



A ministry of the Northeastern PA and
Southeastern PA Synods of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church In America. Accredited by
the American Camp Association.



**PLUS, REGISTER
NOW FOR
SUMMER 2026:**

SAVE THE DATES!

Giving Tuesday • Dec. 2, 2025

Winter Connect • Jan. 9 – 11, 2026

Spring Family Nature Retreat • March 20 – 22, 2026

MayPlay Day • May 2, 2026

*Summer Family Camp
/Artist Retreat* • July 5 – 10, 2026

Labor Day Family Camp • Aug. 4 – 7, 2026

Fall Women's Retreat • Oct. 2 – 4, 2026

SESSION 1: June 21 – 26
SESSION 2: June 28 – July 3 *
SESSION 3: July 5 – 10 +
SESSION 4: July 12 – 17 **

SESSION 5: July 19 – 24 #
SESSION 6: July 26 – 31 #
SESSION 7: August 2 – 7 #
SESSION 8: August 9 – 14 *

* Try Camp is available + Family Camp, Artist's Retreat # Rafting trip option available

Learn more and register online at **bearcreekcamp.org**