

By Chris Thurber

*A chance encounter
revives the faith*



Left to Right: Jeff Bradley, Chris Thurber, Tim Yeager, and Ted Lutkus.

Lifelong Leaders

I had a surreal experience in February at the National Association of Independent Schools conference in Washington, D.C. I'd been invited to present a workshop called Cracking Kids' Secret Code, one of my all-time favorite topics. The session focused on interpreting the subtext of what young people say and responding empathically to their coded speech. It's my contention that this deep and genuine empathy nurtures the strongest connections that teachers, camp staff and parents make with youth.

As I walked toward the speaker registration kiosk, I literally bumped into Jeff Bradley, in whose cabin I served as a Leader-in-Training (LIT) in 1984. I had known that Jeff worked for a firm that places school headmasters, so it made sense that he was at this conference. As we made lunch plans, another of my LIT mentors, Ted Lutkus, walked by and spotted us. A second round of handshakes and hugs ensued, our lunch plan was revised, and we headed off in different directions to attend morning workshops. When Jeff arrived at lunch, he brought Tim Yeager, who was—you guessed it—another division head in whose cabin I had served two weeks as a LIT. Soon after texting Ted our location, I was sitting down with three fine gentlemen, each of whom had mentored me as a LIT for two weeks. It was completely

unplanned, utterly fantastic and, yes, tremendously entertaining.

One Career With Many Paths

Naturally, we reminisced about 1984 and my many blunders as a LIT. We also marveled that we had all become professional educators. Sure, we had taken different career paths, earned different degrees, and lived in different parts of the world, but our shared commitment to the development of young people was stronger than ever. Jeff, Ted and Tim teased me about having a Ph.D., which they said predictably fit my studious (geeky?) nature and work ethic. We razzed each other about the origins of our camp nicknames. (That's a different article.) And we speculated about the future of camps and independent schools. As the two industries progress and overlap, their missions are becoming more refined and complementary. It's ironic that camp professionals are working hard to be relevant to schools, given that camps were created by professional educators to be a pedagogical counterpoint to the classroom.

More Company

Our gales of laughter were identical to those we shared in 1984, and I struggled just as hard as I had on nights off not to blow soda through my nostrils. I realized that this intensity of laughter is only shared

among the best of friends whose trust in one another invites incisive commentary and exposes vulnerabilities in a protected space.

Of course, we were beginning to attract the attention of conference participants at surrounding tables who clearly were not having as much fun as we were. Too bad, I thought. When is the next time I'll get to sit down with three of my four LIT mentors? If our table is getting a little rowdy, what is the big deal? It was at this moment when Kate Windsor, Headmistress of Miss Porter's School, walked over.

Kate is a friend whose son, Jack, was a junior leader at camp last summer. We greeted each other warmly, and I introduced her to my friends. I explained that I was sitting with three phenomenal guys who had been my LIT mentors, and were now professional educators. I asked if Jack had been asked to return as a LIT this summer. Kate smiled, said he had, and described a recent conversation with her son. "Jack was struggling with whether to get a job and make some money, go to lacrosse camp so he had a chance at varsity, or return to camp." I held my breath, wanting to convey respect for whatever choice she had encouraged Jack to make. Camp is not for everyone, and family circumstances vary widely. I'm biased toward camp, of course, but for my own children,

not anyone else's. Kate continued, "Naturally, I encouraged him to return for the nine weeks of his LIT summer. Not only was it an honor to have been asked back, but I know that he'll have an experience like yours, where the mentoring he'll receive will last a lifetime."

I agree wholeheartedly. The apprentice model of internal leadership development, about which I am frequently asked to teach, pairs young leaders with role models whose sterling example endures well beyond camp. Indeed, camp is nothing if not a powerful launch pad for living kindly and serving others. And what better teaching tool than homegrown leadership-by-example?

Putting It In Perspective

When I sat down, I had flashbulb memories of moments when Jeff, Ted and Tim had made a difference in my development as a leader. From Jeff I learned to take time with those I mentor. I'll never forget washing up for bed one night and walking to the cot where I slept, located along the same wall as Jeff's senior-leader bunk. Jeff spoke up: "I saw you were reading William Peter Blatty's book, *The Exorcist*. Want to see something cool?" He then showed me a pack of photos, several of which were taken near the Georgetown campus, where he went to school. One showed the famously long and lethal stone staircase featured in William Friedkin's movie version of the novel. Yes, it was cool. But what was so much cooler was that this experienced leader, in a ranking staff position, was taking an interest in me beyond what was required.

From Ted I learned to provide and process feedback. On our way out of the dining hall one evening, Ted pulled me aside. We'd just shared the first meal with our new cabin of nine 12-year-olds. I had tried hard to take the initiative and show Ted that I could encourage good conversation around the table. "Can I give you some feedback?" he asked. "Sure." (What else is a LIT supposed to say?) Ted continued, "You have a ton of energy, which is great. But that whole speech about how to make a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich the right way was a little manic. It might go over well with the 9-year-olds, but these boys have different sensibilities. Just tap the brakes a bit and follow my lead for a day. You'll catch on." I did catch on, eventually becoming the division head

myself five years later. Most important, I had felt the power of a caring mentor deliver balanced and timely feedback.

And from Tim I learned to keep my sense of humor front-and-center; to not take myself or my challenges too seriously. For parents, teachers and camp staff, taking one's job as a youth-development professional seriously is essential. Taking oneself too seriously can easily lead to discouragement and burnout. Tim's trademark joke was a whimsical comment with a deadpan delivery. He'd witness someone do something mildly idiotic—a frequent occurrence among 14-year-old boys at camp—and he'd pause, eyebrows raised. Then he'd look around skeptically at the group and say, "Gentlemen, that's one way someone might choose to do that." Invariably, we'd laugh until our sides were splitting (yes, you had to be there), but then a transformation would occur in the group. Whatever problematic behavior had blossomed a moment ago withered and died. No lecture, just laughter.

After lunch that day in D.C., I delivered my best-ever version of my

presentation to a standing-room-only crowd. It felt great to hit my laugh lines, answer questions intelligently, and give the participants a new set of tools to connect with their students and colleagues. Better still was how amazing it felt to know that each person in the room had devoted his or her career to making lasting and inspiring connections with youth. Best of all was remembering that you can take a kid out of the camp, but you can't take the camp out of a kid.

Even if that kid is 43 years old and has kids of his own. **CB**

Dr. Christopher Thurber is a board-certified clinical psychologist, father and author of The Summer Camp Handbook, now available online for free at SummerCampHandbook.com. He is the co-creator of ExpertOnlineTraining.com, a set of Internet-based-video training modules for camp counselors, nurses and doctors. He can be reached via e-mail at chris@campspirit.com.

To comment on this article, log on to www.camp-business.com

WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH TWO MORE DAYS OF STAFF TRAINING?

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	32	33	It's Free	

ExpertOnlineTraining.com
VIDEOS. QUIZZES. HANDOUTS.

\$ 0

Get it today! 877 237 3931

Unlimited staff accounts to train at home or anywhere else

Unlimited uploads of your own videos and documents

Unlimited custom quizzes to measure and track learning

Plus 2 of our premium Leadership Essentials videos

ENTER CB MAY #32 OR TEXT CBMAY*32 TO 41411