Optimist Volunteers for Youth, Inc. sits in a valley of the Santa Cruz Mountains about an hour south of San Francisco, California and five miles from the Pacific Ocean. Sponsored by 12 San Francisco Bay Area Optimist Clubs, this is a non-profit summer camp program with a single mission — to provide youth with a safe, enjoyable and educational camp experience at little to no cost, while offering character building opportunities and promoting service, volunteerism and leadership within the community.

Optimist Volunteers for Youth Camp

Due to the collaborative efforts of these Optimists Clubs dating back to the early 1950s, the Optimist Volunteers for Youth (OVY) Camp has become a quality summer camp program for families that otherwise could not afford to send their child to camp. Optimists contribute in numerous ways, including volunteering their time at weekly fundraising events and providing resources for day-to-day running of the camp. Some Clubs donate sleeping bags for campers that do not have adequate gear. Families pay based on a sliding scale, sometimes paying as little as $25 for the entire week. OVY campers come from Bay Area foster care systems, social service agencies, church groups, ressource centers and after school programs.

Over 35 teenage volunteers, many of whom were former OVY campers, act as role models and mentors for the campers. The week of camp can make just as much of an impact on the volunteers, as it does on the campers.

Gabby, a former volunteer and current staff member said, “OVY Camp has considerably changed my life. I have gained more confidence within myself as a result of being a part of this peaceful community. I have grown as a leader, met amazing people and have made memories that can never be replaced. Volunteering and working at OVY Camp has shaped my aspirations in life and has encouraged me to pursue a career that involves working and directing youth.”

Every week of OVY Camp is packed with adventure. The kids arrive on Sunday afternoon and stay through Friday morning. Activities range from campfires, skits, trips to the beach, arts and crafts, archery, hikes, games, cooking, swimming to camping in tipis.

“In my opinion, it was an amazing learning experience, as well as fun! We did a night swim, ate good food, played an interesting game called Bean and slept in real life tipis. Overall I think this summer camp was amazing and I recommend it for any child looking for some serious adventure,” said 11-year old camper Lilly.

OVY Camp 2013 was one of the most successful summer camp seasons in recent history, serving over 200 campers ages 9-14 through 5 one-week sessions. Half of the campers were returning from the previous year.

The Executive Director of OVY Camp and Event Center, Matthew Lyles, is excited for the future of OVY Camp. “The OVY Camp community is getting stronger and more tight-knit after every summer season. With each new generation of campers turned volunteers, and volunteers turned staff, OVY Camp is quickly turning into a summertime staple for communities all over the San Francisco Bay Area,” said Lyles. “All of the Optimist Clubs of the San Francisco Bay Area are definitely looking forward to building on the successes of the last few years.”

Collaboration is the Key to Success!

The close partnerships between the following Optimist Clubs make OVY Camp a reality: Castro Valley, Cupertino, De Anza, Los Gatos, Miracle Mile, Newark, Redwood City, San Carlos/Belmont, San Jose, San Leandro, Santa Clara and Woodside Terrace.

Over the years, lots of different people have left their mark on OVY Camp. However, the mission has always stayed the same: create a safe space for at-risk kids to get out into nature, make friends and just be a kid for a week.” said Harry Greenwood, OVY Camp Board Member since 1985 and De Anza Optimist Club President.

Thanks to Matthew Lyles, Executive Director of OVY Camp and Event Center for sharing information on this project.

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The Optimist