



Episode 20 –
Learn About Our 2025 Build Your Best School Year Summer Camp
Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am your host Melissa Turnpaugh, American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth Project Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. I want to welcome Mike Brady to the podcast. Welcome.

Mike Brady:

Thanks, Melissa. It's awesome to be here.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Awesome. Well, we are super excited to have you here as we gear up for this year's summer camp. Just for our fellow listeners, you guys may know in previous episodes that I worked at Valley Youth House before, so I'm very familiar with Camp Fowler that Mike is the director at. However, I've never been to the site but looking forward to our visit that's coming up in a couple weeks.

Just want to give you guys a little advertisement. We do have our Build Your Best School Year Summer Camp coming up this summer, from July 28th to Friday, August 1st. Super excited for that. For those of you who have been following us along this journey, you know that we are in year four of this camp, but this is year two in-person. We've been able and fortunate enough to move out of the virtual camp setting to actually being in-person. We're super excited to be partnering with Camp Fowler, with Mike and all this staff, as kids get to come. As a reminder, this is a Pennsylvania McKinney Vento eligible summer camp, so it's for students entering sixth through eighth in fall of 2025.

Keep on the lookout for your emails, we'll be having registration coming live soon. Many of you will probably have already heard this podcast, but we also are having our Build Your Best School Year webinar this Friday, on the 21st at 10:00 AM. You'll be able to find that recording, so even if you hear this before or afterwards, you'll still have access to that recording.

Without further ado, I want to get started and highlight the exciting time that's going to come this summer with Camp Fowler. Mike, can you just give us a little bit of history about Camp Fowler and how it began?

Mike Brady:

Sure. Camp Fowler actually has a really rich history. It was built in 1944 and it was originally known as Camp Horseshoe. We're in Orefield, PA, which is just outside of Allentown. Originally, the camp was run by the Allentown Boys and Girls Club. If you talk to people from Allentown, especially people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, and you mention Camp Horseshoe, a lot of Allentown folks have memories of Camp Horseshoe.

In the late '90s, early 2000s, the Allentown Boys and Girls Club ran into some financial issues and had to leave the camp. The camp set empty for a couple of years. Then Valley Youth House, the organization you had mentioned a moment ago, found the camp, decided they wanted to purchase it. And then bought it and took ownership in 2004.

When Valley Youth House took over, the camp was in pretty bad shape. The cabins were falling apart. The pool was a mess. Slowly but surely, they started some projects. Moving the pool was the first one. If you come to camp, the pool sits right in the middle of the camp. It used to be tucked away in the corner. Then a shower house was built. Then there was a cabin campaign a few years ago to rebuild the cabins, so now we have these climate-controlled cabins that all have private bathrooms and running water. Yeah, here we are today. 2025 and the camp is alive and well.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Awesome. Yes, love hearing how the camp has developed so much from Camp Horseshoe to Camp Fowler. I know you mentioned some of how the camp has grown and changed in terms of facilities and activities. What are some of the highlights that middle school students should be excited about? What are the most popular ones or most impactful that they might be looking forward to?

Mike Brady:

Yeah. A middle schooler coming here, first of all, they're going to step into the unknown a little bit. They're going to step out of their comfort zone. One of the first experiences that they have is they don't have a phone. For a lot of middle schoolers, that's a huge thing. We do have a policy that we ask the kids that come here not to have phones with them because we really want them to connect. That's one of the big things that they experience when they get here is just connecting with each other, connecting with nature, and disconnecting from technology.

Outside of that, we have so many activities. We have a pool. We usually offer swimming. In the summertime, we offer swimming every day for our campers. We have a high ropes course. The kids can climb our 30-foot climbing wall. There's a zip-line attached to that. And there's some other climbing elements that they can experience 30-feet in the air. We've got low ropes, two

low ropes courses. That challenge groups, middle school groups, to work together to traverse across a wire through some obstacles. We've got sports courts.

Just this past summer, we added a skate park. So skateboarding, roller skating, rollerblading, scootering on the park has been really popular. We've got fields that we use for activities. We've got bikes. We've got a pickleball court that we just put in last year. Lots of activities to keep the kids busy. But I have to say, one of the most popular is what seems to be the most simple. It's a creek that runs through. The Jordan Creek runs through camp. When the kids have an opportunity, they always go to the creek.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome. Yeah, that is such a highlight for sure. I know you shared some of the pictures. In a lot of them, the kids are really enjoying their time there. I was going to say, I feel like the other highlight, at least from last year's camp that we had, we only were able to offer two days of swimming and the kids were so disappointed. I know hearing that they can do that every day at your camp is going to be super exciting for them.

Mike Brady:

That's definitely a highlight. When we talk to kids at the end of the camp, or even in the middle of the camp, and we ask them what their highlight, a lot of them point to the pool. Which in the middle of July, the end of July, is definitely needed-

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yes.

Mike Brady:

... after a day of playing outside.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

For sure. For those who might be interested in registering a student for this camp, can you walk us through what a typical day might look like for a middle school student attending for the week?

Mike Brady:

Sure. Once they're here for an overnight camp, the days are very structured, although there is some time built in for some free time. Essentially, they'll wake up in the morning and the first thing they do is they'll loop up with their cabin. They'll circle up with their cabin, check in with each other, see how everybody's doing. Then they'll go to breakfast. We eat all our meals together in the dining hall.

This summer, we're going to be transitioning to family-style meals. In the past, it was a buffet line that you walk through and the tables were set up like a cafeteria. Which didn't really lend

itself well to interacting with more than one or two people. This year, our tables are going to be set up family-style so everybody will sit around in a square. We want the idea of a circle, but we have rectangle tables. They'll sit together in a square so everybody can see each other. The food will be brought out family-style as well. You won't have to go up through a buffet line, all the food will be delivered to the tables. It's going to lend itself to community building. That's one of the big things that we stress out here is connecting.

After breakfast, we'll have a full camp loop, which means we all get together. Our summer program director will probably do some sort of energizer with everybody to get everybody hyped up and get the energy to the level that we like to have it at camp. Then any announcements about the day's activities or themes will happen. Then we always have bead ceremonies at any of our meetings. The campers can earn beads by living out our values. We have five values that we stress at camp. It's be safe, be committed, be respectful, be accountable, and have fun. That's an opportunity in the morning to give beads. The kids earn the beads, the beads go on a string, and they continue to earn them throughout the week. That all happened in the morning loop.

After that, we start our day. The kids will rotate through stations. We offer art, adventure, pool, really cool STEM activities. We have a health, wellness, and garden activity as well. Then we have outdoor games and activities. They'll rotate through those stations. In the morning, they go through one before lunch. They'll have that one station, they'll loop it up with their cabin. Again, prepare for lunch. But also, just check in, make sure everybody's doing well, see if anybody needs anything. We have lunch together, real similar to the breakfast, family-style.

Then the afternoon is, again, rotating through stations that they didn't get through in the morning. Then in the afternoon, around 3:00, we come back together. We have a full camp loop similar to the morning. That's where we'll get out the beads. But then we usually do our rare beads in our afternoon loop. Rare beads could be a bead for climbing the rock wall. Or we have a really super-rare bead called the rockstar bead, there's only one of them. It's given to somebody whose really gone above-and-beyond and we just call them our rockstar for the day. What's cool about the rockstar bead is that the person who gets that bead, the person who earns that bead is looking for the next rockstar. They identify either a camper or a staff that's gone above-and-beyond and they give it to that person in our ceremony. We got the beads.

After that, in the afternoon, we give them some free time. About 3:15, about 4:00, there's different stations that they can choose to go to. We usually offer art, the creek. We open up skateboarding, we open up the basketball court. There's a lot of options for where campers can go. Then after free time, we come back together as a camp and we do some full camp activities. An example would be the counselor scavenger hunt, which is really popular. All the campers start at one spot, they stand together as a cabin, and it's their task to go out and find all the counselors who are hidden all over the camp. After that, we have dinner. Dinner, real similar to breakfast and lunch, it's family-style. Cabins sit together and enjoy the meal. When I talk about highlights, the pool is definitely always one. But the campers always comment on our food and how good it is.

After dinner, we have another camp-wide activity similar to the one before dinner. It's some sort of competition or some sort of way to get all campers involved in activities throughout camp. Yeah. Then after that, we transition back into the cabins and then get ready for our evening

activity. Our evening activity could be a campfire, it might be a night hike. It could be a nighttime swim, which is always really popular. We have a variety of nighttime activities. Then kids start getting ready for bed about 9:15, 9:30. They'll meet back at the cabin and just transition, make any preparations for nighttime. Then 10:00 is about the time that we shut things down and lights are out.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome.

Mike Brady:

It's a great long, engaging day.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yes, very. Hopefully they're very tired out by the end of it. I love that you mention this rockstar bead. I think it's awesome too, that they then get the initiative to figure out who receives it next. It really gives them a leadership aspect. Then I love that they're also going to get the opportunity to have that nice balance of fun and learning.

Mike Brady:

Yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

It's probably all fun, that they're not even recognizing that they're learning during those times too, like with gardening or STEM activities. Looking forward to being able to be a part of that this summer.

Talking about even the different beads that they're getting living out missions and doing the rare beads, what kind of challenges do you see some of these kids who come to camp experience, and then how would you say they overcome them?

Mike Brady:

Yeah, that's a good question. One of the challenges is the one that I mentioned, just being off of electronics. That's usually more of a perceived challenge than an actual challenge. A lot of times, the idea of being away from your phone or being away from some sort of device is often ... You get a lot of angst from campers on that first day. But once they're away from it, and it's locked in a drawer, and I reassure them, "Hey, at any point, you want access, you want to contact somebody at home, you have access to it." Once it's gone, a lot of times they don't even realize it and the rest of the week just flies by. I can't tell you how many times I've talked to a camper at the end of a week and asked them, "Hey, how was that being away from your phone?" They're like, "Oh my God, I didn't even think about it the whole time." That's one of the

big challenges, is that perception of, "Oh, man, I'm going to miss out on something if I don't have my phone attached."

The other one is just being away from the familiar. The familiar place, the familiar people that you're used to. There is a little bit of that homesickness, of just being away from the people and things that you're used to. And being in a new setting. Often times, that first day is, again, a little bit of anxiety just from being away from what's normal.

But I always share this story. I had a camper two summers ago who was extremely upset on the first day. Just wanted to leave, wanted to leave, wanted to go. We contacted the parents and the parents were like, "You know, we really want her to have this experience. We think that by letting her come home, it's just sending the wrong message." We were able to keep her and calm her down, reassure her that everything was going to be fine. That was the first night.

Now fast-forward to the last day of camp. We're packing up our cabins, we're getting ready to leave. The same camper is losing it, she's crying, hysterical that she's leaving camp and she's going to be leaving these friends that she just met and made over the last couple days. It was just really interesting to watch her go from being extremely upset from being there to being that upset for having to leave. The funny thing was these new friends that she met, they all lived within 10 or 15 minutes of her.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Well, that worked out perfect.

Mike Brady:

Hopefully we created friends for life.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's awesome. Thank you for sharing that story.

Mike Brady:

Sure.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

While you have all these campers that camp and they may be feeling different emotions, those that are super excited, those that are anxious. What is the one thing that each camper should absolutely try at Camp Fowler?

Mike Brady:

Oof. Yeah, that's a loaded question. I would say just try something that is outside of your comfort zone. That's one thing that we really stress out here is really trying to stretch your

comfort zone. For example, one kid's comfort zone might be, "I am afraid of heights, I don't want to climb the climbing wall." All right, that's fine. Why don't you try putting a harness on and just see how that feels? Then after that, harness is on, you're feeling pretty comfortable. Why don't we see what it feels like to go one or two rungs up a ladder? Then eventually, I've seen kids go from being reluctant to putting on a harness to climbing a 30-foot climbing wall and zipping down off of it.

Really, for each kid, it's going to be a different activity or a different thing. But generally, it's hey, step outside of your comfort zone and try something you wouldn't normally try.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah. I like that response. I thought maybe you would give me an actual activity, but I really do appreciate the insight that every kid's going to be different. It should really matter just about their comfort zone and getting out of that. That's awesome.

You've been working with this population. Obviously, our students are McKinney Vento eligible.

Mike Brady:

Yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

You've had experience working with homeless youth. What is the most rewarding thing for you being the camp director and getting to do this all summer with different populations?

Mike Brady:

Wow. To pin it down to one thing is pretty difficult. It's generally very rewarding. But to hear a kid say that they've had the time of their life, or they met a friend that they think they're going to be friends with for life. Or they met a staff that they really connected with. Any time I see a connection that I think is going to stay with them when they leave camp is super rewarding.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah. We always say it takes a village. The more you can keep building onto that, the better for the child's development and self-esteem, and everything.

Now at camp, I know you'll talk a little bit about maybe some of your staffing and how they come from all different places. How do you incorporate that camp is very inclusive and welcoming for every student that comes?

Mike Brady:

Yeah. That's a huge, huge part of the camp is that we're an inclusive space that is welcoming to all. Yeah, it's reflected in our staff. You had mentioned our staff. We have a really nice sized

staff. We have 14 general counselors, and then we have five specialists who deliver the instruction. Then outside of that, we've got a bunch of ropes course facilitators and lifeguards. If you look at our general counselors, they're the ones that have the most connection with the kids. They're with them for the majority of the day. The way we do it, we have two counselors per group of kids. The group of kids is usually about 10. Most of the day, there's a two-to-10 ratio. But when they're in programming, it's even higher than that.

Our counselors literally come from all over the globe. Like I said, we have 14 of them. They come from places as far away as New Zealand, Zambia, Africa, Columbia, Mexico, Finland, Scotland. I think something that speaks volumes to what we build out here is that 11 of our 14 counselors from all over the world are coming back to camp this summer. They've stayed connected with one another, they stayed connected with camp, and they're coming back.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's a great percentage, love that. I'm super excited that the campers get to experience that because I think sometimes, they are not always given the opportunity to be open to more diverse populations. I think it's so credible that you have those counselors who are coming from all over. I'm sure the campers are going to have 500 questions about what the counselors experience in their countries and how it's different from here. That is a nice touch that's different from a lot of camps that we usually hear about.

Mike Brady:

It's really fun because not only are they coming from different places, but they're bringing their culture, their accents-

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah.

Mike Brady:

... their languages here. It is fun to have conversations with them or listen to conversations with kids and the counselors. They talk about some of the most simple but, "Hey, what do you call potato chips in your country?" Or, "I can't believe that you guys call this this in the United States." It's really these cool conversations that happen.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That is awesome. As the director, how do you best support and motivate your staff to make sure that campers are having the best experience?

Mike Brady:

Yeah. I think it all starts with identifying the right staff to begin with. During the interview process, and screening the staff, looking for staff that are highly motivated.

But outside of that, once they're here, once we've selected them and they're here, it's just having good communication. Having really clear communication. Letting people know what's going on. If there's changes to the schedule, letting everybody know. And also, just really letting people know we are a family. As a staff, we are a family. If there's something that's impacting you in a way that's positive, we want to celebrate it. But if there's anything impacting you in a negative way, what can we do to support you? Do you need some time away? I'll step in and be a counselor for an hour if you need to go make a phone call home, or whatever.

Like I said, communication and being a support. Making a culture where we can really lean on each other like that.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, that's great. That really will show by the way you guys interact and probably will make such an impact for the kids, too. Just watching that you have each other's back, and you want it to be the best experience and best week for them for their summer.

Speaking about your camp, if there is a student that has never been to any type of camp or they've only done overnight camps where it's more in a dorm ... Last year, camp was held at Susquehanna University. It's obviously a different feel, a different vibe. We're going to real camp where we're in the middle of nowhere, it's only them for the week. How would you describe how outdoor camps make an impact or a difference in the development of campers today?

Mike Brady:

Yeah. Again, a lot of it is perception. It might feel like we're in the middle of nowhere, but literally there's the grocery store five minutes from here. Downtown Allentown is 20 minutes from here. A lot of it is just perception. The idea that we're out here in the middle of the nature, it is what it is. I would say one of the biggest things is just the connecting with nature, because often times we as adults and young people don't take the opportunity to really connect with nature. Being out here and perceiving that you're in the middle of nowhere surrounded completely by nature allows for kids just to take a deep breath and take it in.

Like I said, the creek flows through here. I can tell you that no matter what mood a kid is in, they could be in the middle of a crisis, just bringing them down to the creek, we often to refer to the creek as our therapist. Because literally, we'll go down there and it just evens everybody out. I've been with older students down there, older than middle school students. Really tough kids who they act real tough. Bring them down there, they instantly become little kids. It's the equalizer. That, in addition to the rest of the 43-acres that we have here, it just provides a really good backdrop.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah. I am definitely a water girl, so I hear you on the therapist.

Mike Brady:

Yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Pools, oceans, lakes, definitely calming for me.

I know that we might have some parents or guardians who might listen to this podcast, whether they're just following it from word-of-mouth or because they came across it, or a homeless liaison shared it out with them. But what advice or information would you provide to a parent whose trying to make a decision of whether this is the right choice for their child to go or not?

Mike Brady:

Yeah. I would encourage them to, if they have any questions, information like this podcast, information like we're going to present on Friday is helpful. But they could always reach out to me. I know geographically, it might not be possible, but coming and actually visiting the camp is very reassuring. I know for other campers that live close in the Lehigh Valley, just coming to camp and seeing the grounds is magical. It flips the switch like, "Oh, yeah, I'm really excited."

But I would just reassure parents that whatever concerns that they have or whatever anxiety they have, again, communication helps clear a lot of that. Contacting me or another staff member with any questions or concerns that they have. And knowing that, at any point, they can contact their kid. If they want to contact them in the middle of the night, we'll have a nurse overnight. Our camp program director is here overnight. We've got all the staff that'll be in the cabins here. At no point will they be out of contact with their kid. Hopefully that reassures a little bit, too.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, for sure. I do love the idea. Yes, geographically it might not help or happen. But being able to go, I think about when you were looking at colleges or just looking for a place to live, when you actually go and see a place and get the feel, you know, "Okay, this is where I want to go," or, "No, this is not where I want to go." I think that's awesome that you offer that opportunity.

I guess before we wrap up with this podcast about camp, what is your biggest takeaway that you hope that listeners will walk away with after listening to this episode?

Mike Brady:

I just hope that somebody listening knows that not only is this an awesome place, we have really cool things here, we've got great amenities, but the experience is really what the takeaway is. Coming here, having an amazing experience, meeting new people, maybe creating friendships that last a lifetime, but definitely creating memories that last a lifetime. Hopefully they take some of the learning that happens here and apply it outside of camp. Those are the big takeaways.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Yeah, I love that. I know as someone who was a camper and also a camp counselor, those summers were always such a highlight. I've made friends that I'm still friends with from being a camper and a counselor, so I couldn't echo that more.

Thank you so much for giving us all that information. From beginning of Camp Fowler that was Camp Horseshoe, to getting to where it is now and just all the development. We're super excited for this summer's camp. For our listeners with this message, we are going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you, Mike, for being with us today.

Mike Brady:

Yeah. Thanks, Melissa.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

If you guys would like to learn more about the Valley Youth House Camp Fowler, you can go to valleyyouthhouse.org/camp-fowler. Thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed the episode. Please check back and tune in again.