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|CORPORATE CARING|

Camp gives hurting children a place for summer fun

FOSTER CHILDREN AT Franklin County Children's Services have a place to heal together at Royal Family Kid's Camp.

BY JILL MCCULLOUGH | FOR BUSINESS FIRST

There's a mom and dad out there who have some explaining to do.

A few years ago, a couple from Nigeria brought their young son to the United States and then fled while he slept.

The 10-year-old simply woke up one morning to find that his parents had returned to their home country, leaving him alone to fend for himself.

Not long after the abandonment, the boy enrolled in a weeklong summer camp north of Dublin called Royal Family Kids' Camp, which caters to abused, neglected and abandoned children, said Stephen Fox, the camp's director.

"You can imagine the emotional problems this kid had when we got him. He needed special attention throughout the week, so we made sure that he had his own camp counselor," said Fox, who did not disclose the boy's name.

He also said the assigned counselor, who had received special training prior to camp, had his work cut out for him.

"This was an extreme case. This kid had issues that he brought to camp. Obviously, he was angry over his abandonment. At night, he would



COURTESY ROYAL FAMILY KIDS CAMPS

A counselor at Royal Family Kid's Camps north of Dublin gives a 2008 camper "the look" in the camp's makeup center.

beat on things, throw things and hit the walls," said Fox. "For that entire week, we all just loved on him."

The following year, the boy attended the camp much improved. The year after that, he returned a typical, well-adjusted 12-year-old. After that, Fox lost touch.

"We think he was adopted," said Fox, who says he thinks Royal Family Kids' Camp sets into motion a healing process that benefits troubled kids.

Larry Whiteside, a spokesman for Franklin County Children's Services, said the camp is the only opportunity for some kids to experience camp.

"As a result of the sometimes severe abuse and neglect our children experience, they ... have ... emotional and behavioral problems. These challenges prohibit them from attending regular camp," said Whiteside, who often receives letters and calls from appreciative campers and their foster parents, who

witness firsthand the positive effect the camp has on the children.

The area's Royal Family Kids' Camp is one of many nationwide and is funded by a Hilliard organization called the Starfish Alliance. Fox, who serves as its executive director, says the nonprofit funds, staffs and oversees the camp.

The local agency was founded in 2001; the national organization dates back to 1985, he said.

"We are the local group that runs the (local) camp," said Fox, who did not disclose the location of the Central Ohio campsite for security purposes.

"We were founded on the principle that kids who have been abused need a different kind of camp. For example, a regular camp might have 10 to 12 kids per counselor.

"Our camp has two children per counselor. Plus, our counselors go through special training so they know how to meet the needs of these kids."

Fox said there are 164 Royal Family Kids' Camps in the United States and beyond. The goal is to serve 100,000 campers by 2030. So far, the national organization has served more than 53,000. The local camp has been in operation since 2002 and has served 200 kids between the ages of 7 and 12.

"All of our campers are in foster care through Franklin County

Children's Services. The idea is to give them one week of positive memories every year. We also want to prove to them that – besides their foster parents – there are adults out there who love them," he said. "We provide positive role models and an oasis. At the same time, we give foster parents a little relief at home."

The Starfish Alliance relies on Radiant Life Church in Dublin, the camp's sponsor, to fund the camp. It also depends on fundraisers and individuals who secure corporate donations from employers, including Cardinal Health.

Last year, more than 48 percent of the agency's \$30,000 annual budget came from public contributions, Fox said.

Fox hopes to at least double the funding and volunteer support so the camp can serve an average of 60 children per year as opposed to 37.

Beyond that, he would like to secure additional funding so the camp can begin serving abused, neglected and abandoned teenagers in the community.

"We do not like the idea that kids only get to attend six years of camp at the most. As soon as a child turns 13, we do not want him to think that yet another set of adults is willing to abandon him," he said.

JILL MCCULLOUGH is a freelance writer.

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STARFISH ALLIANCE INC.

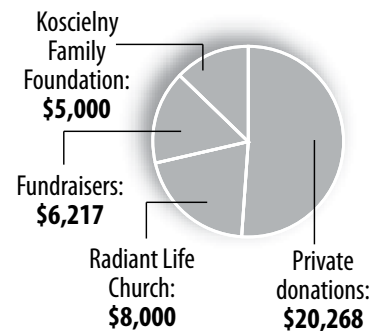
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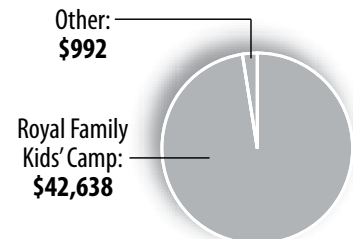
Fax: 866-422-8292

Web sites: starfishalliance.org
and rffc.org

Revenue FY2007: \$39,485



Expenses FY2007: \$43,630



Mission: Dedicated to the education, advocacy and service of hurting kids and their parents.

Executive staff: Stephen Fox, executive director and Royal Family Kids' Camps camp director; John Dale, assistant camp director; Jessica Dale, assistant camp director; Clella G. Fox, assistant camp director; Tracey Lambert, treasurer; Linda O'Ryan, education coordinator & church liaison; Cindy Newsom, church liaison; Dorwin Bropst, church liaison; and Bev Stall, social worker.

Board members: Stephen Fox; Rev. Dennis Griffin; and Rev. David Gross.

Paid staff: 0

Volunteers: 80

Annual fundraisers: Schmidt's Restaurant, March; Outback Steakhouse, September; yard sale, August; and RFFC Golf Tournament, May.

National organization: Chartered by Royal Family Kids' Camps

Quick facts:

- Services are provided at no cost.
- Staff members are unpaid volunteers.
- Received the 2003 Franklin County Children's Services Executive Director's Award for Voluntary Service and 2009 Franklin Country Children's Services Community Advocate Award.