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THE NOT-SO-LAZY DAYS OF SUMMER

by Penny Penniston

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Every June and July, Lab undergoes a transformation. Classrooms become crime labs and pastry shops. Textbooks turn into story books. The hallways are for scavenger hunts; knitting is homework; study hall becomes dance hall. This is Summer Lab. And if you could bottle the energy contained within these walls, you could turn back time and become a kid again.

ADVENTURE KIDS DAY CAMP

It is Wednesday morning and a pack of boys have taken over the gymnastics room. They are playing “fort wars.” The game involves building forts with gymnastics mats, arming one’s self with nerf balls, and then launching strategic raids over the athletic equipment. This is just one group activity during one hour of the day. A wall in Sunny Gymnasium displays the many groups’ schedules for the week: there will be kickball, floor hockey and four square. There will be arts and crafts, swimming lessons, field trips, a dress-up day and an American Idol lip synch contest.

The origin of Adventure Kids Day Camp goes back decades. According to Dean of Students Larry McFarlane, it arose from teacher Mary William’s belief that “kids needed the summer off. That they needed time to play.” The original incarnation was Mac Willeys, a fun-in-the-sun day camp. Mr. McFarlane was a counselor from 1975-1999. “I spent a lot of time in vans driving kids back and forth,” he says with a smile.

The long life of the program means that many kids return summer after summer. They may show up for the fun, but the thing that keeps them coming back is the friends. Director Meg Janda says that the program is designed this way. The activities are entertaining, but they're also bonding. They allow the kids to forge connections with each other and build a sense of community.

This doesn't stop with the camper experience. Kids are meant to evolve from campers to counselors, taking on new roles and responsibilities along the way. "I have two counselors who are about to go to college," says Ms. Janda. "They started eight years ago as campers."

The campers, however, are in no hurry to grow up. In the arts & crafts room, a group of girls show off a large mural of Millennium Park. They have re-imagined it as a candy land. There is, of course, the jelly bean sculpture. Smiley-face skyscrapers stretch into the sky. Bubbles and colored confetti float through cotton candy clouds. It is Chicago summer viewed through the eyes of a child.

SUMMER LAB ON STAGE

In the music room, fifty junior-high kids jump together in choreographed glee. They are dancing to "Don't Give Me that Broccoli," a wildly silly song by The Phenomenauts. The medley of dance moves includes the pony, the twist, the finger wave, the sway n' snap, and the mime. "I choreographed it at eight-thirty this morning" laughs Katy Sinclair.

Ms. Sinclair and Marc Piane ('92) co-direct the popular "Summer Lab on Stage" program. The class takes fifth through eighth grade students and gets them acting, improvising, singing and dancing. The program ends with a live performance for parents and fellow campers. This year's show will feature adaptations of global folk tales plus songs by Michael Ford. (Mr. Ford is a collaborator with Sandra Boynton on

popular kids music such as The Philadelphia Chickens and Rhinoceros Tap). The students will play the starring role in every step of the process, from the writing, to the dancing, to the acting.

It is a huge production, but Mr. Piane says that the show is “the easy part.” The real goal of Summer Lab on Stage is to empower kids. “I don’t really think of it as a theater training program. I think of it as people training.” Dance teaches coordination. Singing requires that kids work together, listen and harmonize. Improvisation gets them thinking on their feet and teaches them to be comfortable in front of a group. These are timely life lessons for pre-adolescents.

SUMMER SCHOOL

Students in Mark Wagner’s summer school class have discovered electricity. At each lab table, kids in protective goggles hover over home-made power boards. They adjust wires, attach batteries and wield the soldering iron expertly. Andre Battles explains that the boards are used to power circuits. Andre tests his board by inserting a small red bulb. He flips the switch and the bulb lights up in a rosy glow. Andre smiles. He says this is his favorite part, “seeing it work.”

Mr. Wagner ran the science club at the Museum of Science and Industry for several years. With Lab Summer School, he saw an opportunity to give students a similar kind of experience, a hands-on experience that they couldn’t ordinarily get in the classroom. “I think kids should tinker,” says Mr. Wagner. In his summer electronics class, students begin by building a power board and then move on to design their own practical applications for the boards.

Auxiliary Programs Director Ned Reece calls the summer programs “the Lab at Lab.” While some summer programs are taken for credit and replicate the classes of the academic year, many more forge their own path. Mr. Reece says that summer gives the school an opportunity to test novel curriculum ideas or give students experiences that they wouldn’t ordinarily have.

The eclectic offerings of the Summer School include Lego engineering, jewelry design, pastry making, mask-making, knitting, web design, sculpture, and mystery writing. A class called “Pi in the Eye: Visualizing Mathematics” has fifth and sixth graders creating and examining art with mathematical techniques. In another class down the hall, sixth through ninth graders become crime scene investigators. They study forensics and logic, then use those skills to tackle mysteries. A past mystery was the infamous scandal “Who Stole Mr. Reece’s Cookies?” Students studied the scene, took forensic evidence, conducted interviews and solved the crime.

A SUMMER HOME AWAY FROM HOME

While nearly half of the Summer Lab students are also enrolled in the Lab School, but the majority are not. The University of Chicago regularly brings in guests from around the world. Those that come for the summer often send their children to Summer Lab. In addition to these international students, there are also local visitors—neighborhood kids looking for excitement. This diversity adds to the Summer Lab experience and brings current Lab students a new mix of friends.

Alumnus Josh Hyman has two daughters at a school in Cleveland Heights. When the girls came to stay with him in Chicago for the summer, he enrolled them in Summer Lab. He wanted something beyond a traditional day camp; he wanted something that would appeal to the the kids’ passions. “[The] programs... were challenging and inspiring,” he says. And as an alumnus, he felt comfortable with Lab. “I was always very secure in knowing that whatever the school does, it does well.”

The choice was both practical and sentimental. Having his daughters enrolled in Summer Lab also gives Mr. Hyman an opportunity to pass down his own history with the school. He attended the school from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. He says his years at Lab gave him

“friends for life,” and he hopes that his daughters forge the same bonds. “If they have anything close to the experience that I had... it would be tremendous,” he says.

(SIDEBAR) OUT AND ABOUT

It may be called “Summer Lab,” but the program reaches far beyond the Hyde Park campus. “Cycling Chicago,” a class for sixth through tenth graders, pedals kids around Chicago’s miles of beautiful bike paths. The second through fourth grade “Nature Explorers” use the city’s nature preserves as wilderness classrooms. The campers at Adventure Kids Day Camp take regular field trips to attractions such as Millennium Park and Brookfield Zoo.

With the Field Study Program, Lab reaches around the world. A trip to Cortez, Colorado brings students to an excavation site in Crow Canyon. Students dig through the history of the Pueblo Indians and tour Mesa Verde National Park. Past destinations have included a photography workshop in Italy, a cultural exchange in China and a trip to Chile to help build a school facility.