

## Gary's Big Confession –

As a camp director I would sometimes fall into a trap of convincing myself that if I bought the right big new activity or facility that it would make my camp outrageously fun. Counselors and parents would thank me and campers would flock to us. And the more time I spent in the office and with adults, the more I believed it. I even got good at selling it.

But whenever I spent time with campers and staff (and my own children) I was reminded of what we *all* knew once: at Christmas or birthdays it's not the fancy presents that kids play with the longest, it's the **empty box**. Here's a test: where have *you* made the best memories? Going out to an expensive dinner with friends?... or *cooking* dinner together with friends?

Most of the camps I visit either *have* big expensive toys for kids to play with, or they're *wishing* for big toys. Yet the most *successful* camps challenge kids to be more creative than that. "What can we do with of what we've got?" What kid would remember an event where you *rented* the costumes; compared to crazy and clever made-up costumes and props *they* helped create?

We lament at helicopter parents that buy their kids everything they want, including a bouncy-castle for their birthday. And we turn around and do what at camp? Buy a "blob?" Rent a movie? Build a theme-park ride? Send our campers on field-trips because we've run-out of fun at camp?

I think we can rob our kids of the best experiences. If fun at camp depends on our expensive new equipment, what have we taught them? That fun isn't something you create, it's something you *buy*? (Don't they get that message already... everywhere?)

I'm not saying a camp shouldn't have unique facilities or make big plans. But don't let those plans keep you from providing what they really need *next summer*. Some empty boxes.

What kind of "empty box" experiences do *your* campers have? Share them with us?

THANKS. [gary@garyforster.com](mailto:gary@garyforster.com)

*Some of the replies:*

**RE: Empty Boxes** – Flatrock Camp (IN) staff alumnus Daryl Gunyon writes: "You are right. Camps can get too fancy-schmancy. I remember making stuff out of nothing and having a ball. My old campers (and they are actually *old* now,) tell me about the great times we had on Klondike day. I'll bet it didn't take 50 bucks to do all of that." -- [dwgunyon@yahoo.com](mailto:dwgunyon@yahoo.com)

**Empty Box Castles** -- Your most recent newsletter had a piece on boxes that resonated with me. We have an annual activity which literally involves empty boxes. We collect medium and large boxes all year round and store them until the 9th week of camp. Then we spread them out on the field and each huddle of campers gets, 20+ boxes, a couple rolls of masking tape, three paper cups half-filled with water, 5 gator skin balls and 15 minutes to build the best castle they can. They have to incorporate the cups of water on the tops (must be exposed on at least three sides). Once construction is done we award a couple of extra balls to the most creative castles, then they go to war. If you knock down another castle's last cup of water (with the gator skin balls), then they become part of your kingdom and help you conquer other castles. In the end we are one giant kingdom with lots of ruined castles littered across the field. It is one of the highlights of the summer and only costs about 40 bucks for the paper cups and the masking tape to engage over 500 kids. (Incidentally, several of the younger huddles spend the rest of the morning building mazes, forts, etc with the remaining intact boxes. You do have to be careful to exclude those big packing staples that are part of some boxes, but once its on your radar that's easy. -- *Thad Gifford-Smith* Executive Director Camp Combe (NY) [tsmith@ymca-cnw.org](mailto:tsmith@ymca-cnw.org)

**A Very Small Camp on a Finger Lake** – Joe Murphy writes: “I love your newsletters! Your ‘Big Confession’ post came at a very appropriate time because, as we are seeking to aggressively expand our programming, we’re seriously considering adding a blob (which is exactly what you mentioned in your article!) or a climbing tower; but both are cost-prohibitive for us. So there I was, lost in a dark sea of despair and frustration because we probably can’t afford to add anything the “cool” camps have, , and your wonderful article appears in my inbox. It brightened my day immensely because it reminded me that when it comes to what really matters at those “cool” camps, we already have everything they have—perhaps even more.

1.) A picture of most of our characters from our Star Wars All-Camp Event in 2011. Our program director that year was inexperienced and didn’t think about how to play out the Star Wars theme for our All-Camp Event that session, so we grabbed a bunch of Sysco food boxes and marched over to Arts and Crafts, and the A&C counselors and campers and I sat down and planned out all these amazing costumes, which I think turned out pretty dang cool for being planned and built that morning by a couple periods of arts and crafts! This is at the end of the game, so Chewbacca’s yarn costume is a little rough-looking.



2.) A picture of our 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Breakfast Bonanza Pancake Relays. We make coffee can stoves and cook pancakes, then race them around in the lake, pour butter and syrup and batter from up high, and the counselors have to eat them in whatever condition they’re in. Jeff Peneston from Camp Talooli in Pennelville, NY shared this activity with me.



3.) Those kids with the tree branches at the beach aren’t collecting firewood. They’re actually a youngest boys’ tribe at day camp in Fun Times, a program area ONLY for 6-8 year olds in our day camp programs. In Fun Times, it’s a new adventure every day, from hunting down the evil guy who stole something or another (that’s what this picture is of—they found the bad guy on the waterfront and were carrying their camouflage with them), to ninja training, to making jello water balloons and piñatas, etc. The older kids actually REQUEST to be allowed to do Fun Times, and I tell them no because they get special things for being older that the youngest kids don’t get! I garnered this idea from the camp where I was a counselor – YMCA Camp Lakewood in Missouri, where they do a similar thing for their 8-year-old resident campers.



Something else we do a lot of is nature play—fort building and gully hikes and such. It costs nothing and it's what camp was made for, but we never did it at my old Y camp. I'm sure other camps do those things.” – *Contact Joe: [joe@auburnymca.net](mailto:joe@auburnymca.net)*



**“Empty Boxes” in British Columbia** – Calder Cheverie offers, “We take hula-hoops and use them to create ‘micro-worlds.’ Each child takes a hula-hoop and we go into the woods where they place it wherever they like, and whatever exists inside of that hula-hoop -- roots, rocks, a stump, a little stream or puddle -- it becomes the foundation for a world they are going to create. Using whatever tools they want around them they can make little houses, fields a forest. The counselor strolls between each hula-hoop asking thought-provoking questions like ‘Do any

creatures live in your world? What do they look like and do they eat food? Are there battles in your world or is it peaceful? The Weather?’ After free imaginative building time, we gather around each one and take a tour, giving each child the opportunity to tell everyone about the world they've created.” – *Calder is the Sumer Camp and OE Director at Sasamat Outdoor Centre; [calder@sasamat.org](mailto:calder@sasamat.org).*

**From the Woman with the Best Job Title Ever** – “Here’s my favorite empty box experience at Camp Kingfisher:

‘Iron Chef’ Nature Camp

- Collect weird stuff all year from camp families and staff. Usually things that would go to the trash eventually – we don’t claim to keep them forever, but they get one more good run before they hit the landfill
  - Old floppy discs
  - Cat food cups
  - Egg cartons
  - Bottle caps
  - Used (and clean) plastic silverware
  - Plastic container caps
  - Whatever....
- Each week a secret “ingredient” is announced
  - we play the theme song from Iron Chef
  - have a staff person in a chef’s hat
  - a magic bag from which the item is revealed (by a camper who is called up to draw it out of the bag)
- We then provide a BUNCH of the ingredient and each camper group takes what they want (sometimes re regulate the amount so we don’t run out).
- Campers then (in their groups – it’s day camp) have 4 days (reveal on Tuesday morning, voting on Friday morning) to create something / anything using the ingredient at the primary piece.



- Friday morning all entries are out on display and campers vote as they walk in – they are allowed to vote twice, but only once for their own item – let’s them get the “I vote for me” out of their system and still look at others
- There is a staff person at the voting table and hands are marked with an X after voting. Voting lasts through the morning and at lunch the winning group is announced. They usually receive some cool nature gift like a wildflower card you can plant in the garden
- We have seen some amazing stuff and LOTS of the groups have to vote on who takes them home at the end. The best? An Eiffel tower replica made from 3.5” red floppy discs – some random parent donated over 3,000 of them.”

-- Amy Bram, *Director of Exceptional Experiences*, Ramah Darom, GA [amybram@ramahdarom.org](mailto:amybram@ramahdarom.org)