

Life Changers

Dr. Barnes Boffey – Over 40 years of camping

Life Changers challenge us to reinvent the boundaries of what we expect about ourselves, what we believe about ourselves, and what we imagine our lives can be.

One of the claims often made by those of us in the camping world is that by spending time at camp, children can significantly change their lives for the better. What we generally imply is that they become more responsible, more creative, more balanced, and more resilient in their ability to live their lives and that they learn to integrate values and beliefs that they may not have access to as clearly in the non-camp world. It is clear that we provide an environment in which campers and counselors grow and change, but it may not be as easy to define how that change takes place or how we ensure that our environment will foster that change. Many of the situations that “change our lives” are the direct result of our interactions with a specific person or group of people who allow us to see both ourselves and the world in different ways. In moments of personal transformation, these people have a powerful impact on our perceptions—they believe in our capacity to be more than we are currently being, and they expand our perception of what is possible in our own lives and in the world.

These people are *Life Changers*. They nurture relationships within which others can grow and explore, and although their personalities may be very different, there seem to be common characteristics or attributes that exemplify people who have such a powerful impact on our thinking.

Life Changes at Camp

Camp professionals can identify these general attributes in many of their staff, but it is the *Life Changers* among them who consistently act in a manner that significantly redefines the boundaries of our expectations. For example, most camp counselors encourage children, providing them with the support they need to try new challenges and to go the extra mile. But counselors who become *Life Changers* surprise children with encouragement that goes beyond what they can imagine and have previously experienced. The significant difference in a *Life Changer* is that they challenge us to reinvent the boundaries of what we expect of ourselves.

What are the fairly common expectations for many of the characteristics that describe most caring and competent camp professionals? What are the significantly different expectations and experiences that *Life Changers* create in their relationships with others?

Love

We expect to be loved when we “behave well” or when we fulfill the expectations placed upon us by others. *Life Changers* love us more than we believe we deserve. In doing so, our own sense of worth and value is redefined, expanding our capacity to be loving, compassionate, and self-accepting. *Life Changers* love us even when we do not love ourselves.

Humor

We expect to experience humor in our lives, most often when things are going well and the mood is light. When things are not going well, our ability to be humorous and playful often suffers quickly and severely. *Life Changers* help us find humor in situations where we would normally succumb to worry, despair, or fear. They understand that humor is an affirmation of the wondrous complexity of life. *Life Changers* teach us the power of humor and how to appreciate the lighter side of even our darkest moments.

Forgiveness

We expect to be forgiven when we earn it by atoning for our mistakes and admitting that we are wrong. Sometimes we have thoughts or actions that we believe are so egregious, that we hide

them to avoid judgment. Life Changers teach us to forgive ourselves for things we imagine to be unforgivable. They are never concerned with blame and shame, but only in how we convert our mistakes into opportunities for growth. A Life Changer understands that consequences may be reasonable, but forgiveness is magical.

Honesty

We expect people to be honest with us, except when they fear hurting our feelings or fear their own severe embarrassment. We come to understand that consistent honesty can be difficult to give and is often compromised when it leads to personal vulnerability. Life Changers tell us the truth when others will not. In doing so, they are able to combine honesty with love. For Life Changers, uncomfortable feedback is always coupled with a sincere offer of help. Life Changers understand that simply telling the truth is a courageous act.

Humility

We expect that people will respond with humility when they have been humbled or even humiliated. Experience teaches us, however, that humility often departs when the remembrance of imperfections grows more distant. Life Changers constantly acknowledge their own imperfections—they are comfortable with their mistakes. They teach with a gentleness that comes from self-acceptance. Life Changers share both their victories and defeats, encouraging us to use their experiences as lessons in our own lives.

Encouragement

We expect encouragement when others believe that what we are attempting is a worthwhile endeavor or when it is obvious that there is a chance of success. Most people look at our actions and encourage us in our “doing.” Life Changers see beyond our actions and encourage us in our “being.” Life Changers always believe in us more than we believe in ourselves. Life Changers believe in us when our own confidence has been shaken. They help us to nurture our dreams—even before we are ready to accept the possibility of achieving them.

Generosity

We expect generosity when we have earned it and from those who can afford to be generous. We understand generosity most when it does not appear to exceed what a person is able to give without experiencing undue hardship. Life Changers generously and repeatedly give of themselves, their resources, and their time without obligation or expectation. For Life Changers, service to others is a guiding principle. They are generous beyond what we expect or can even understand.

Integrity

We expect others to behave with integrity, but we also understand that their willingness to maintain integrity will be weighed against the often-harsh consequences of living truthfully. Experience teaches us that integrity may be compromised for convenience or to avoid unpleasant consequences. Life Changers exemplify in their own behavior a level of integrity, congruency, and constancy that shatters our preconceptions and excuses. Life Changers teach us by simply being who they are, accepting who they are, and demonstrating the qualities they challenge us to embody.

Fostering Life Changers

If our goal as a camp community is to create significant change in the lives of children, then we will need to spend our time helping staff to become Life Changers—to become counselors who will go beyond their own limitations and open themselves to the possibility of a new found personal strength and ability to be of service to children and adults. Perhaps the greatest tool in this training is modeling this concept ourselves as directors and camp leaders. The greatest tribute we can pay to those who have helped shape our lives is to challenge our own fears and expectations—to adopt a way of living that will help others see new possibilities and new horizons.