



Meet Elija— A Future Camp Counselor

IN 2019, to ensure Friends of Camp Concord met its core mission to send underserved youth to Camp Concord, it partnered with Court Appointed Special Advocates of Contra Costa County (CASA). A program where ordinary volunteers do extraordinary work for abused, neglected, and abandoned children and youth in foster care. CASA Volunteer Advocates are appointed by a juvenile court judge to advocate one-on-one, providing a powerful voice for a child or youth during their uncertain journey in the foster care system. This was when we met CASA volunteer Jerry and his foster youth Elija. Completing the paperwork with the court and social worker for foster youth to attend camp is no easy feat, and Jerry made it all possible due to his dedication to Elija.

Elija has attended Camp Concord on a scholarship for three years; 2019, 2021, and 2022. He was awarded a scholarship for 2020, but due to the COVID-19 closure was not able to attend. His counselor in 2019, Cole, said he was one of the more introverted campers in Bear's cabin at the beginning of the week. By the end of the week, he asked if he could lead every activity the cabin did. "Seeing him come out of his shell and grow throughout that week was incredible; his energy and enthusiasm was contagious".

Cole and Elija reunited this summer. Cole, as a head counselor, and Elija, as a 13-year-old, attending his last eligible year as a Youth Camp participant. Cole met a much different camper in Elija than he did in 2019. This summer, Cole mentored Elija, telling him he had high expectations for him as he was among one of the oldest campers in the session. Despite being in a cabin with behavioral issues early in the week, Cole believes the cabin's turnaround was largely due to the example set by Elija. Having been to camp twice before, Elija knew what to expect and look forward to. Elija is a kind, compassionate and thoughtful youth who, on the night hike, asked if he and his cabin could be in the back to make sure nobody got left behind. One of his skills the counselors are impressed with is how competent a marksman Elija has become with archery.



While getting ready to load the bus for the trip back to Concord this summer, Elija told every staff member he could that they didn't need to say goodbye to him because he would be back next year as a member of the Counselor in Training (CIT) program.



This past summer, the CIT program was formally launched. It is the next step for campers ages 14-17 to take their camp experience to the next level and gain experience in outdoor leadership and environmental education. It is an opportunity to develop job skills, be a part of a team, and contribute to the camp experience at Camp Concord. The counselors have watched Elija gain his own sense of independence and belonging the past three camp sessions and those skills will be further developed with the direct training focused on leadership, group management, and risk assessment provided by the CIT program.