

Camp Rilea turned over to children one week a year, thanks to Fred Rosenbaum

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Lori Tobias, The

OregonianChildren at Camp Rosenbaum slide down the hill.

WARRENTON - On this July afternoon at Camp Rilea the scene is anything but military. Kids dance atop the tanks and hurl themselves down hills. They play fireman. They build candy landfills and kites and derby cars, and later there will be bonfires and late night songs.

For one week here at Camp Rosenbaum, the campers get to escape the real world and let themselves just be kids.

Now in its 39th year, Camp Rosenbaum has hosted roughly 6,500 kids, all from underprivileged homes, most who have never been to camp before, some who've barely left their own neighborhood.

Wednesday the camp will dedicate a 3,600-square-foot garden and granite marker to camp founder Fred Rosenbaum, a survivor of the Holocaust who never forgot the kindness of strangers.

Forty-odd years ago, Fred Rosenbaum, was spending a weekend at the coast with his 11 - and 12-year-old children. Back then, he was the chairman of the Portland Housing Authority and the assistant adjutant general of the Oregon Air National Guard

On a whim, he decided to take the kids to Camp Rilea to show them where the Guardsmen trained.

"I drove through the front gate and the place was totally empty," recalls Rosenbaum, 83 and a retired brigadier general. "We drove to the drill field and flew some kites and passed football. It dawned on me, here you have this Camp Rilea totally empty, and there are poor kids in Portland who haven't even seen the ocean yet. Why don't I try to put together a camp for the children in public housing in Portland?"

It was an idea Rosenbaum believes was inspired many years before when he himself was just a kid.

"I went through the Holocaust when I was 12," says Rosenbaum. "I was a ward of the Anglican Church in England for two years. They got 10,000 Jewish kids out of Austria and Germany. All of that has remained in my brain. It never left. I think this is where it started."

The idea for a camp may have sounded like a good one to Rosenbaum, but the commander of the National Guard was not impressed.

"He said, 'Fred, what are you thinking? This is fraud, waste and abuse.'"

OK, Rosenbaum replied. Then, he paid a visit to then Gov. Tom McCall. "I had worked on his campaign and I knew him quite well. I said, 'Tom what do you think?' He said, 'I think it is an excellent idea.'"

It was not, however, an immediate success. In fact, at one point Rosenbaum nearly gave up on the camp.

"None of us had ever run a kid's camp in our lives," says Rosenbaum. "We had no basis of comparison. We needed more people, more planning, more budget."

Thanks to a new commander, eventually, he got it.

Today, Camp Rosenbaum is big on the anti-gang and anti-drug messages.

Campers are given a good citizenship theme every day, and encouraged to play sports and make friends. They decorate their dorms and adopt slogans for their groups. Each is given a T-shirt, a sweatshirt and a pair of Nikes.

"We're so proud of the camp," says Rosenbaum. "It is just wonderful. It is true commitment. This is not, 'Let's go have a good time and drink a beer.' These people are really committed to showing these young kids a good time. It's the first time in many of their lives that someone says, I am here for you 24/7. What can I do for you, honey?"

It is not an experience they are likely to forget. Ask Reba Strickland, one of the first female campers at Camp Rosenbaum.

"I can still see me packing my little sleeping bag and waiting days before it was time to go," says Strickland, a nurse at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center. "I had never been camping. I learned how to do a bunch of different games, and learned different songs, and made friends. I get tears in my eyes just thinking about all the things Camp Rosenbaum did for me."

On Monday afternoon, the first full day of camp, campers have just finished lunch, followed by foolery outside that involves music, dancing and finally a mass launch down the hill on magic carpets of cardboard.

Inside, "Momma Bear" AKA Yvette Potter, who in real life works for the Washington County Housing Authority, is helping six girls make kites from precut plastic that once functioned as tablecloths.

"Hey, can we take these home?" asks Ciara Polito, 9.

"They are yours to take home forever," replies Momma Bear. "And if anything happens to it, now you'll know how to build a new one."

Polito finishes her kite, and neatly letters on the black and white checkered face, "Fly Me," accented with a small heart.

Outside, the wind catches the kite, lifting it high into the sky.

"It's awesome," says Polito. "I never flew a kite before. It seems beautiful."

And then, someone announces an opportunity for yet another adventure, the chance to build a candy landfill

"That seems fun," says Polito.

And then, she winds the kite string around the spool, and looking toward the sky, calls "Come down, "Fly Me."

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