

Jackson's Story



In our recent Winter newsletter, we shared an update on Jackson, the troubled 8-year-old who started camp in 2000 - the very day that Starfish first opened its doors. Now 19, Jackson will celebrate his 10th summer at camp as Starfish celebrates its 10th anniversary! Recently, Jackson and his mother Donna sat down to talk about their experience with Starfish.

Donna: It's easy to talk about Camp Starfish and what it means for us. Jackson's special bond with the camp experience and the people there began ten years ago when he was just eight years old. To understand the importance of Camp Starfish to us, you need to understand a little about Jackson.

Jackson: When I was young, I felt that my teachers didn't expect much from me and didn't understand me. School was very confusing to me and I could not stay there all day.

Donna: The year prior to camp was an extremely difficult year for Jackson due to an escalation of his behavioral, academic, and social, and mental health challenges. His time was spent in hospitals and crisis settings. Professionals working with him consistently recommended therapeutic residential placement, which would give us the structure Jackson needed and the respite that his brother and I needed. When he was rejected by the program which seemed most promising, my panic increased. I desperately scoured the internet for other options. The story of Camp Starfish, which was opening that year for the first time, caught my attention.

Jackson: The first year I went to camp, the counselors believed that I could do things. They encouraged me to try.

Donna: Driving to camp that first year, I was concerned that I would get a phone call telling me to pick up Jackson before the session ended. I felt a lot better when the staff greeted us before we stopped the car and enveloped Jackson with just the right amount of enthusiasm that he could accept.



Jackson: The staff was great. If I didn't do something well or gave up, they didn't laugh at me. They praised me for making an attempt and said I could do it again later.

Donna: During camp, the reports I received were positive. Jackson was participating in all areas of the camp program. On the last day of camp, I almost didn't recognize my son! He appeared relaxed and happy. He made eye contact, showed me his favorite places at camp (the basketball court first as always), and interacted with counselors and friends he had made. He immediately told me he wanted to return next year and stay longer. The rest is history! This year, he's going to be a Junior Counselor.



Jackson: I like being with the younger campers. I think they sometimes listen to me differently because I am younger and can talk about my own things if I think it will help them calm down.

Donna: Because of his opportunities to be a Leader-in-Training and S.T.A.R. Corps Apprentice the past four summers, Jackson has discovered that he has a unique ability to support younger children when they are in distress. He can accept the differences and challenges that children face and use his personal experiences in a caring way. He is very proud of his ability in this capacity. I have no doubt that he will use these experiences in other areas of his life.

Jackson: Every year I do more things at camp and have more responsibilities. I know that the counselors want me to feel good about what I'm doing and they won't put me in situations that might be too much for me.

Donna: When Jackson is at camp, I never have to wonder if he is safe or learning or having fun. He does all that and more. At home, he talks about his camp experiences from the time he leaves one year until he returns the next. He revels in engaging campers (and counselors!) in basketball and enjoys the reputation he has as a player. He has been on the school basketball

team, where the coaches recognize the positive emotional changes he has made each summer. His teachers and professionals have seen these changes too, and actively support Camp Starfish as an important piece of his growing independence as well as his academic plan.

Jackson: Camp Starfish is truly my second home.

Donna: I think that pretty accurately sums up the contribution Camp Starfish has made to Jackson's quality of life! Children come to Starfish when they cannot succeed elsewhere, and I know that most could not attend without the generous financial assistance provided. Jackson would never have had the opportunity that has made such a positive difference in his life without the camperships we've received from Starfish, and we are so grateful. Jackson is passionate about Camp Starfish and basketball. Anything else means little to him.

Jackson: I can't imagine my life without Camp Starfish.

