



Help During the Holidays – How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact

Chase Garbarino | December 25th, 2010

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Camp ★ Starfish

Every day here at BostInno, we constantly discuss what's new with business in Boston and around New England. We chatter about inspiring entrepreneurs, all trying to build big companies out of next to nothing. We are easily excited by cool new technology and the hopes of billion dollar exits, and we believe the work of entrepreneurs is critical in order to turn around our economy. However, this past week I attended a breakfast that reminded me that you don't need to build a market leading company in order to touch people's lives and change the world.

A few months back I received an invitation from [Matt Rudnick of MHT Partners](#), a small investment bank here in Boston, to attend an information session for something called Camp Starfish. I had become familiar with Matt through Pinyadda (one of our online properties) and Twitter, but didn't know what to expect of the breakfast before heading over. While I knew from [their website](#) that Camp Starfish was a small summer camp that helped children with "emotional, behavioral and learning problems", I had no idea how big of an impact this little camp had on so many people.

Within a few minutes of arriving at 101 Arch Street near Downtown Crossing where the meeting was being held, I was quickly swept into a conversation with a few of the organization's board members. Immediately apparent was the passion these people had for what they were doing, and it was quite contagious. Camp Starfish is unique in that it brings in kids with a range of challenges – from kids with autism, kids that are bi polar, or those that simply were victim to unfortunate circumstances growing up. Each camper is then paired with a counselor who they receive



one-on-one attention from for the duration of camp. As you can imagine, this type of attention and devotion goes a long way for these kids, who often struggle in everyday situations.

During the breakfast I was able to speak with a number of people to learn about experiences at Camp Starfish. One young man who came up as a camper at Camp Starfish is now a counselor majoring in criminal justice at a local college looking to become a S.W.A.T. member. The confidence the former camper-turned-counselor portrayed was clear evidence of the profound impact the camp had on him, and his continued commitment showed the tight-knit community Camp Starfish provides. Emily Golinsky, the Executive Director, provided a video below which will give you an idea of just how happy the kids are at camp. I have also included a great letter from a boy's mother below, as I can not do the story justice in anything I write here. I urge you to watch the video and give it a read to understand the importance of the work of Camp Starfish.



The thing that was most clear to me from the breakfast was the importance of having the one-to-one camper-counselor ratio, which as you can imagine does not come cheaply. Emily explained to me that, "If that visited Bostonno donated just \$25, the result would provide scholarships for an entire session of summer campers. If everyone donated \$10 each, it would cover the cost of hiring our summer staff team. If half of them donated only \$5 a piece, it would enable Starfish to end the year having completed 100% of our fundraising goal. Every penny makes a difference, as you know...and the difference you are making is priceless."

[Here is a link to the donation page for Camp Starfish](#) – if you can spare a few dollars and pass this along to others, we could collectively help change give kids facing incredible challenges the summer of a lifetime in 2011. For those interested in devoting time to Camp Starfish, there is a spring cleanup day and the organization is always looking for more great counselors – for more info shoot me an email at chase at bostinnovation dot com and I can pass you on to Emily. Thanks in advance for your consideration and happy holidays!



Max's story

Only months after making national headlines when the story of his life with bipolar disorder was the cover article in Newsweek, Max, age 11, arrived at Camp Starfish for the first time.



Max and his parents had as many questions and concerns about his experience as the staff had about Max. His parents wanted to know what would happen if his behavior escalated. The staff wanted to know what his favorite foods were, what activities he would like best, and if he was excited about swimming.

"Max will never truly be OK," the Newsweek article said. "In a few years, he will hit puberty, and at that point things will get even more complicated. There are scientists who have thought about the future of children like Max in great depth...they agree that those who have [Max's diagnosis] face a long, rough road. [Children in a recent study of the disorder] who fared badly had an early onset, as well as psychosis, anxiety, ADHD and [other symptoms]. Max has all these. His chances do not look good." (Newsweek, May 2008)

Few of the staff at Starfish had read the article before meeting Max, and even fewer of those were concerned with its contents, though it described a child whose small successes along the way were seemingly nothing compared to the insurmountable issues he faced.

The Starfish staff knew: Max deserved, like all Starfish campers, a chance to succeed. An opportunity to excel. A place to grow. A summer camp experience that wasn't defined by his diagnosis.

A letter from Max's parents

I am writing to let you know how much Camp Starfish meant to Max and to our family. As a first time camper who had experienced many "failures" in social and academic settings, our entire family was nervous about sending Max to overnight camp. The only time he had ever been away from home was for a psychiatric hospitalization. We were anxious as was he. Although we had heard such wonderful things about Camp Starfish, we believed Max was different from all the other kids and would probably not succeed. We were prepared to pick him up at camp the day after he arrived.

We could not be happier to be so wrong! From the moment we met the staff at orientation, we knew Starfish was a special place but how would Max do? Would he fit in? Would he be "too behavioral" for your program? This was a phrase we grew increasingly accustomed to. Driving to South Station for drop off, we were all nervous. Max promised he would try hard but secretly I expected failure.

When we were greeted at drop off, Max quickly relaxed. He began chatting with a counselor who we now know was Rachel. She knew Max's interests and engaged him in immediate conversation which took his mind off sleeping away from mom and dad and eased our minds. In fact when it was time to board the bus, Max almost forgot to say goodbye. Rachel gently reminded him. He boarded the bus and I began to cry. They were tears of happiness (he got on the bus), tears of anxiety (would he fail again) and tears of relief (he might actually do this). A counselor approached me and said "Don't worry Mom. We'll take good care of him". I get tears in my eyes now just remembering those words. He was so right!


Max had an amazing ten days. I think I finally slept through the night for the first time in ten years...Max was safe, happy and in a nurturing and understanding place. Max wasn't different. Max was just Max. I was even lucky enough to get a picture of Max emailed to me which I kept with me at all times. The smile on his face in that picture said it all. Camp was a success and Max was happy!

On visiting day Max had to know...can I come back next year for longer??? The answer...YES! Max had found a place where he could grow and learn and not be judged. I cried again...happy tears. We could get rejuvenated at home and be stronger and healthier when Max came home to deal with the daily struggles attendant to raising a special needs child. Starfish was a success both for Max and for us at home.

I am looking forward to next year just as much as Max. He came home a more confident young man who took more responsibility for his person and belongings, showed more respect for his parents and teachers and generally "grew up". He still has that special twinkle in his eye and when we talk of Starfish, that twinkle shines for all to see. THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU. They are easy words to say but from this family, they are heartfelt.

Amy and Rich Blake

This entry was posted on Saturday, December 25th, 2010 at 8:44 am and is filed under Around the Hub. You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

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Warrior Mom 2 weeks ago



This Camp Starfish family has Two Summers and a handful of weekends under our belt. I say we because it just doesn't stop when you pick up your child at camp. The "Tools" are posted on our fridge just as proudly as the certificates of accomplishment..boating, swimming, being a good friend and master of silly handshakes. "Mom, I want to take responsibility for my chores. It doesn't make me feel good when you do them" was something I had no idea how to react to,,, except with a big hug and tears in my eyes.

When I first heard of the camp, from another parent at our therapeutic school the price tag made it just a fantasy for this single mom. However, her words and the look in her eyes stayed with me... you just make it happen. The difference it makes...you just make it happen.

Perseverance in looking for camperships and working extra jobs paid off and my son went for the short session! He loved it sooo much! He begged for more, Then I got to work on a fundraiser / motorcycle run. He went for 29 days last year. I don't know where the money will come from this year with my own health/income taking a hit, but so what. Puberty is here which brings on med changes, and a whole other myriad of issues that we need support with so I'm already working on this year's fundraising events,

The self-esteem my child gained at Camp Starfish is worth EVERYTHING I have. They "Get it". From DAY ONE, when we visited the camp, EVERY counselor and admin. said hi to my son, asked him something. When you get to know them, you KNOW they are great folks who actually enjoy counseling rather than 'just a summer job'. It is the only place, outside of school, he has peers to play with, learn to socialize properly, have some summer fun rather than hanging out inside with mom all day because his disabilities make it so hard to be 'out there' in this bustling, non-tolerant world. If it takes 2 hours to process an issue... then it takes 2 hours, and they are there to do that with him.

Let's not disregard those undisturbed nights of sleep as well :-). I'm counting down the days until...

3 people liked this.

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Seamus 1 week ago

Camp Starfish saved my daughter's life.

1 person liked this.

Like

Reply



Cara Falconi 2 weeks ago

Mr. Garbarino,

Wow..what a great article on Camp Starfish!! Thank you so much for attending the breakfast and taking the time to learn how truly amazing Camp Starfish is! It is great to see Camp Starfish getting the attention it deserves.

My son Ian has attended Camp Starfish for two summers and he can not wait for summer #3! Ian is an adorable little boy whose smile, bright eyes and energetic personality brighten up a room! He looks like a typical 11 year old boy, but he struggles daily to fight severe mental illness. He can not attend a typical camp or regular education school, so when we found Camp Starfish we found a miracle.

This past summer I was a little nervous about sending Ian away to camp because he had been struggling to stay safe for weeks prior, but Starfish welcomed Ian with open arms and helped him shine! He made friends, maintained connections with counselors, participated in activities and stayed safe! He shared lots of laughs, smiles and hugs this session. Ian's experience at Camp Starfish has been great because it gives him the support he needs while allowing him to do "typical" camp activities without singling him out or kicking him out. Camp Starfish has had a major impact on strengthening Ian's self-esteem and it will always have a very special place in our family's life. I have never seen Ian as happy and confident as he was when I picked him up at Camp Starfish...it is a very special place!!!

Thank You
Cara Falconi
A Starfish

1 person liked this.

Like

Reply



ej4412 2 weeks ago



Having worked as a counselor and administrator at Starfish at the "beginning" (summers 2001-2005), I am so happy and proud of how this organization continues to grow and flourish. Because of my first summer at camp in 2001, I pursued a master's degree in social work-- now I spend my days working with at-risk youth in an urban high school. Most days before I leave for work I put on a silver starfish necklace-- it reminds me of a place where adults and children try their best, work through the tough moments with compassion and understanding, and embrace every success. It reminds me of pure joy, laughter, and camp songs. I keep that starfish around my neck so that camp, an important part of why I have chosen this career, is always close to my heart. My wish is for many, many years of continued success for this small non-profit. So if you can, please help continue to shape the lives of these children-- and the lives of the adults who have the honor of working with them.

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1 person liked this.

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Preytis 3 weeks ago

Mr. Garbarino,

Thank you, thank you for highlighting this special place. My son, Tom has attended for six years and considers Camp Starfish his home away from home. His times at Camp Starfish have always made him feel encouraged, important, like he "belongs" and have given my family the rest we need to continue to take care of him on a continual basis.

Tom had an eventful session, full of summer activities, but also marked with some therapeutic breakthroughs and advice and guidance as he prepared to navigate into the public school system (after two years in a therapeutic school) and 9th

grade. It wasn't a "behaviorally pretty" session, but the staff at Starfish supported him in every way and gave to him some life lessons that I hope will stay with him beyond the ride home. Emily, the Camp Director gave Tom the quote "Two Paths diverged in the yellow woods... and I took the one less traveled, and that has made all the difference". The quote hangs on our fridge and I work to remind Tom about the healthy choices he needs to make everyday. The Robert Frost quote nicely sums up the work that the counselors do with these behaviorally challenged kids. They work with them everyday, every moment for the entire session on making the kids understand choices and the benefits of making good ones.

Tom is telling me that he is too old for camp and that this year was his last. It makes me very sad. Yet, behold, just when I think he will not return to camp next year, the new brochure came in the mail and it highlighted a whole new menu of sessions and programs. This year they are offering an Older Camper option and an Adventure/ Trek option, catering to kids like Tom who are "too big for their boots", yet still need the "buff up" of Camp Starfish's wholesomeness. It's like they were reading my mind!

Seeing these new options, I am hoping to send Tom again this year, but if it doesn't work out, it is not the end of my relationship or love for Camp Starfish. They will always be my "charity of choice". They have given to me in countless ways over the years. It has also been great to see them grow into a thriving organization that supports a year-round staff, owns their own property and grows their programs every year.

Thank you again for highlighting this organization that has done so much for me, my son, my family and other families like ours. If there was ever a thought in someone's mind as to which charity to support, please consider Camp Starfish and give a kid the gift of camp.

Best,

Kerry Preytis
Proud Camp Starfish Parent



cgarb liked this

Like

Reply



cgarb



2 weeks ago

in reply to Preytis

Kerry -

Thanks so much for sharing. I am a very new admirer of Camp Starfish and am looking forward to learning more from people like yourself who are a part of their "extended family" and am really excited to lend a hand in some way. I am very glad to hear about the options for older kids too, as I think it is a great thing to try to maintain the relationships that Tom has probably developed over the years.

Thanks again,

Chase

2 people liked this.

Like

Reply



Michael Sparks 3 weeks ago



My son has been a counselor at camp star fish since he was sixteen years old. It was very hard to see him leave every year to do this job that he so dearly loved. He even changed his college major from a music degree to be a pre school to fifth grade teacher. He graduated college on dec. 12th and he is considering going back to be a part of camp star fish this year coming .

After all these years of questioning you Adam and after reading this I now understand why you did what you did. I believe camp star fish also helped you to become the man you have become and I am so very proud of you. If you want one more year at camp I am here to support you in everyway possible. Because what you do is so very important to a lot of little people.

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cgarb liked this

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Preytis 3 weeks ago in reply to Michael Sparks

Mr. Sparks,

I am pretty sure my son Tom had your son for a counselor. Thank you, thank you for lending us your son for so many summers. Tom started Camp Starfish at age 8 and has gone for the past six years. He is much like the boy Max in the Newsweek article. Tom loves Camp Starfish and the counselors have been an integral part of his growing. Just last week we opened a letter from a counselor and re-read it... just for some inspiration. It was amazing to re-read this letter, written by a college student to my son... about keeping on the right track and choosing the right paths in life. These counselors, Adam included, are the best in the world.

Again, thanks for sharing your son with us.

Sincerely,

Kerry Preytis

Proud Camp Starfish Parent



cgarb liked this

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Michael Sparks 2 weeks ago in reply to Preytis



mrs. Preytis

No thank you's are necessary. Adam is an amazing young man he truly loves all of the camp star fish kids. We feel that we know all of these kids from listening to all of the stories Adam has about " His Kids" at the end of camp every year. Please tell Tom what a difference he has made in Adam's life, he has helped Adam in more ways than he knows. Tell Tom that Adam stays on the right track and always chooses the right path in life because of kids like him and that he can never really be too old for camp star fish. Because of kids like Tom I believe Adam will be an amazing father one day but not too soon.

sincerely

the proud father of Adam

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cgarb liked this

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Sharon Bonica 1 week ago

I think this is a great article and I agree with all other comments that have been made by others.

My son Matthew has been going to Camp Starfish since it was at the Cape in 2003 at age 10. He has thoroughly enjoyed the camp and has made some friends he keeps in touch with.

Since he started at Camp Starfish every year at the end of the session/s he has come home learning many new things, more mature etc. and the staff members make compliments and give him a boost on his self esteem. The staff is nothing but complimentary, nurturing and caring people, who really do enjoy their jobs and care deeply about the children whom they are with during the summer months.

I have been nothing but pleased by my sons progress over the years. My son will be joining Camp Starfish for his 9th summer this year and has gone up the ranks with the wonderful new programs that Camp Starfish keeps introducing. I think it's wonderful that they can keep "teen" active and still help them out with the programs they offer.

I hope that some day my son can give to others what has been given to him. I love the staff members and feel very privileged to have known them all these years. Keep up the great work you do at Camp Starfish. (it's hard to really express what I feel they have done for us!)

Sincerely,
Sharon Bonica

Like Reply



Hinksonpmj 2 weeks ago



I am so very glad that such a deserving organization was featured. An organization that shows true heart and spirit. Giving to those who do so much for others is always such a great feeling. I encourage all to become part of making the lives of these kids special. Every little bit will help I'm sure. Great job Camp Starfish

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Like Reply



mangomango 3 weeks ago

What a great story. Thanks for sharing this. It seems to me that the kids who have the most complex problems are coming from families that may have a lot of trouble paying for the camp that could help their child the most. Scholarships in these cases could make a world of difference...

Like Reply



cgarb ★ 2 weeks ago in reply to mangomango

Agreed - which is why I hope the BostInno community will lend a hand as we come to the end of the year. It would be great to get as much support for Camp Starfish as possible!

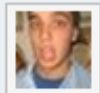


Andre's Mama 3 weeks ago

Thanks for giving the amazing Camp Starfish its due! My 8 year old son was a camper there last summer for the first time. His experience there has turned his life of struggling at home, school, and socially, into a life as the thriving, successful kid he has always been. The excellent support he got at Starfish has transformed both of our lives. I am a widow, and I would have not been able to send him last year but for the availability of a generous scholarship. As I've recently become unemployed, next year will be even more of a financial challenge. I want to thank everyone who plans to contribute to help families like mine - what they are doing at Camp Starfish is nothing short of miraculous.

Like

Reply



cgarb ★ 2 weeks ago in reply to Andre's Mama



Thank's for sharing and I am sorry to hear about you recent unemployment. Hopefully we will be able to lend a hand!

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Reply



Emily 3 weeks ago

Chase, thank you for sharing our story and for the passionate plea you made to get others involved with Camp Starfish. I have no doubt from the comments already posted that there will be a wonderful response and a swell of support for our organization. The picture of Jillian at arts-n-crafts you included is one of my favorites - a moment caught on film where none of her troubles matter - pure happiness, and you've just helped make that a reality for many more children in 2011 and beyond. You and the team at BostInnovation, and everyone who reads your post and learns more about being a part of Camp Starfish - have all just taken the spirit of the holidays and turned it towards life-change for children in desperate need. Thank you - a thousand times over, and maybe that's not even enough.

With best regards and in grateful appreciation,

-Emily

Emily Golinsky

Executive Director, Camp Starfish

emily at campstarfish dot org

Like

Reply



cgarb ★ 2 weeks ago in reply to Emily

NO thank you Emily! My one post doesn't scratch the surface of the good that you do at Camp Starfish. I am looking forward to being a small part of something that has such a huge impact.

Like

Reply



Wein1822 3 weeks ago

What an amazing story about an amazing organization! I now know exactly where my year end charity \$\$ will go! Thank you for sharing this inspiring story.

Like

Reply

Reactions



bonicas 1 week ago

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Help During the Holidays - How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://t.co/eVpPrFf> via [@bostinnovation](#)



kevinphelan 2 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

Help During the Holidays - How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://t.co/fcS4nwQ> via [@bostinnovation](#)



mrudnick 2 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

A huge heartfelt thanks to #BostonInnovation and Chase Garbarino for this: <http://ow.ly/3w7zF> #starfish #in



bostinnovation 2 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

One more retweet from [KmcCarthy](#)

RT [@cgarb](#): PLEASE read and help a challenged kid in need. The comments at the bottom are better than my post about Camp Starfish! <http://t.co/iQDkLgR>



cgarb 2 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

PLEASE read and help a challenged kid in need. The comments at the bottom are better than my post about Camp Starfish! <http://t.co/iQDkLgR>



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One more retweet from [sliggity](#)

Help During the Holidays – How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://bit.ly/hy3lm7>



carriejohnson 3 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

Nice article about a wonderful camp (Starfish): <http://t.co/xr9uRyP>



debjustmeans 3 weeks ago

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Help During the Holidays - How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://t.co/xr9uRyP> via [@bostinnovation](#)



julie_kraft 3 weeks ago

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give to something bigger than yourself <3 <http://bostinnovation.com/2010/12/25/help-during-the-holidays-how-a-small-camp-has-a-huge-impact/>



Kmccarth 3 weeks ago

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GoodTennisNYC 3 weeks ago

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Our own deb's camp!! RT @dejustmeans: Help During the Holidays - How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://t.co/xr9uRyP> via @bostinnovation



dejustmeans 3 weeks ago

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AliPowell21 3 weeks ago

From [Twitter](#) via [BackType](#)

Help During the Holidays - How a Small Camp has a Huge Impact <http://t.co/L7vD8he> @cgarb great thing to write about -



gardnersmitha 3 weeks ago

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