

Paddle Georgia Youth Program 2013 – 106 Miles, One GREAT Time!

This year's PGYP was truly outstanding! Campers and counselors from Camp Horizon in Atlanta joined Joey Giunta and Alicia Evans for an adventurous journey down the lower Flint River. What is Camp Horizon? We received this question throughout the week. It's a place where acceptance and compassion help heal wounded hearts. A place of refuge for children whose lives have been disrupted by neglect and abuse. A place where children living in state custody find a second family to whom they always belong. A place where they are given the tools and support they need to thrive despite their tumultuous backgrounds. We were thrilled to work with Camp Horizon, and the good work they do with the kids throughout the year really shined during the week of Paddle Georgia.



One camper reflected on her thoughts before the trip: *"When I received that thick packet in the mail I thought, 'What has camp Horizon sent me this time?' I read the whole thing, but I thought it was a misunderstanding when it talked about how many miles we had to do in a boat. The thoughts that ran through my head were: 1) How we going to do such a thing in one day? 2) I wonder what the people will think of us. 3) What are we going to eat? 4) I'm going to be shy."*



The campers rose to the challenge of paddling 106 miles, even from Day 1 at Lake Blackshear. They arrived a bit tired from the long drive from Atlanta, but quickly energized as we got in the canoes, graciously donated by James and Debby Lossick at Cedar Creek RV and Outdoor Center. We met with GCA volunteer Vincent Payne, who helped the kids hone in their paddling skills and even brought a literal truckload of Gatorade and snacks for the PGYP for the week. It's generosity like this that helps make this trip such a success, year after year.



The campers had each paddled a canoe before when they attended Camp Horizon in previous years, which is hosted at Camp Twin Lakes in Rutledge, GA. But there were many firsts, including one camper, who writes in her journal, *"Today I experienced using the woods as a natural restroom."* Another camper stated, *"When I first heard about paddle Georgia, I had no real expectations; I simply did not want to go. It was just out of my comfort zone. Not like my camp family. There would be lots of people I did not know and a whole new family I was very unfamiliar with."* This camper turned out to be quite the naturalist and searched for mussels, alligators, and every other wild creature he could find! He later journals, *"My favorite part of today was the canoeing.*



Tomorrow, I'm looking forward to more animal sightseeing and getting more wet." Each camper was able to experience camping in tents provided by REI, and this was a new experience for every one of our campers! Campers loved paddling the canoe solo for the first time, as it gave them independence and time to enjoy and reflect alone in nature.



Each evening, we led the group in a reflection activity called "Thorns and Roses", or your lowest and highest part of your day. We enjoyed sharing our Roses and Thorns with each other, and here is a sampling of some of the camper's roses: *"The best part of today was getting together with all those nice people. Today I really enjoyed myself with my Camp Horizon family. ... I am really excited to swim in the river or whatever. I really think I am*

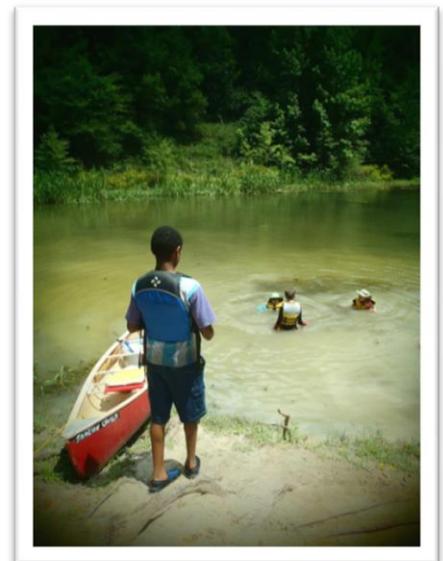
going to have a great time this week." "I had lots of fun today, I had lots of fun canoeing on the river. I have never canoed on a river before." "The funniest moment today was when [a fellow camper] and I flipped out of our boat at Wilson Blue Spring." "We completed our mission and everyone improved their attitude. For the past few days I've been very proud over everyone. My day was outstanding because we did all this as a team." "What happened today, I flipped over with [a counselor], swam in the river, ate lunch, got sunburn on my knees. It was all fun." "I had fun watching everyone jump off the rope swing and into the river. I really had fun swimming and playing with the water squirters. I also liked performing and watching other people perform!" "Today on the Flint I saw an alligator mouth, and sank [two fellow campers] in their canoe."



Roses, thorns, and even surprises came throughout the week. "I was surprised by how focused I was. I was glad at how short it was today, but surprised at how beautiful and cold the springs were." "What surprised me today was that I went to sleep in the canoe. Another that surprised me was that I good on paddling the boat. I was very surprised that today was shorter than the other days and that it was fun for everyone. Another thing that I was surprised is that we had great timing and was finished at 2:30." "[My paddling partner] pointed out a whirl pool which then we got sucked into!" "What surprised me the most? Well 4 things did. First I was surprised that [my paddling partner] could paddle so hard and fast. Second I was surprised that the boat tipped and I found myself under it. Third I was surprised that we got stuck in a whirlpool. 4th I was surprised at the cold clear springs."

But, I think one camper's final day journal entry, written beneath a cloud of gnats at Earle May Boat Basin in Bainbridge, sums up the week of Paddle Georgia for all of us: "Rose – last day of canoeing, thorn – last day of canoeing. It has been quote a long but fun week. We paddled, sprayed and splashed; explored, tipped, laughed, and I'd like to do it all an sometime. There were ups and down, but the ups outweighed the downs. I am a bit tired and it will be good to be back home, but will look at this as a great memory."

Our goals for the PGYP are to give campers a positive and fun introduction to nature and to our state's rivers, to encourage campers to inquire about their environment, to challenge them to work as a team, and to encourage personal growth. On the final day, campers were asked to reflect about their adventure. "This trip was awesome. I am sad we have to leave. I'm going to miss Joey and Alicia. I hope we come again, I don't like that we have to leave." Our naturalist camper said, "This week was very fun and adventurous. I would definitely do it again because I got to see cool animals and see the bad things us humans do to rivers. Also I stepped out of my comfort zone and did new things and met new friends. I would if I could change the color of the water to clear and make the gnats disappear, but overall the trip was fun." Finally, "This Paddle Georgia experience has been good. The top three parts have been the cold clean water springs, paddling 106 miles, and learning about nature and different things. Not only has the trip taught be how to paddle, but showed me some important life lessons such as: life is full of sacrifices, listens to others, live life to the fullest, and always find the good in everything."



Thank you to everyone on Paddle Georgia for welcoming the campers. Thank you to everyone who gave your money, your time, or your words of encouragement. You created a special memory and a unique adventure for our campers.