

Longtime College Settlement Camp Director Karyn Bonner Shares Over 20 Years of Summer Camp Memories

HORSHAM, PENNSYLVANIA, UNITED STATES, September 14, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- With the passage of summer into fall, recollections and reflections of the 2022 [College Settlement](#) Summer Camp season become more precious, as their 100th Anniversary celebration continues.

For over 22 years, Karyn Bonner has been a vital part of College Settlement. First as a swimming instructor and lifeguard at the day camp after her first year in college in her native Edinburgh, Scotland, then as a program director, to her role as Camp Director since 2014, Bonner has devoted her life and her career to the children and families of College Settlement.

Recently, Bonner had the opportunity to review old documents and files in the College Settlement archives at the Horsham offices and found a common thread that connects back to the camp's origins in 1922.

"The more I read about the camp's history, with a deep dive back through the 1940s and 1950s, I saw that there's a grace to it," Bonner said. "There's a grace and the dignity that we've always worked with lower income families, a grace in the way that kids are treated, and grace in the way that the families are treated. One of the things you learn is that when the camp was founded, the workers had to live out of the College Settlement house in South Philadelphia, they didn't come in to work and then go home after work. They had to live in the community, they had to understand the struggles, by living there, by shopping in the same places, by getting your water from the same places, by walking the same streets. So, you became a part of it, rather than



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judging it from the outside, coming in doing your job and leaving.

"I guess that the grace manifests today is in the way we continue to work with kids and families that came up through our camp over many generations, and have become friends," said Bonner. "Many of our camp counselors and staff were once campers. Some of the families are represented on our board. And the families send their kids to our camps because it's affordable, with scholarships and grants. We are in the community with them, not flying in from outside. This camp belongs to the community, to the families that we serve. It's their camp, and our job is to keep the place going for the families of Philadelphia."

Bonner grew up in Scotland and was in the midst of her first year at Edinburgh College in 1988 when she first learned about College Settlement Camps.

"I was a freshman studying medical illustration, and I was also teaching swimming, and lifeguarding, and one of the big brothers of one of the kids I was teaching said that they are always looking for swimming teachers in the United States, especially at summer camps," Bonner recalled. "There was a flyer on the bulletin board for a summer job at College Settlement, so I called the phone number and sent in my application. I must have been a hot commodity because not only was I a lifeguard, but I was also a swimming instructor, and lo and behold, I got a letter in the mail saying I got the job. I started working at the day camp and I just fell in love with it. I loved it! The kids were so much fun. And I just fell right in love with it. Immediately!"

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Karyn Bonner, College Settlement Camp Director

Bonner came back to College Settlement Camps every summer of her collegiate career. The fourth year, she was asked if she would like to continue with the Outdoor School program in the fall and was able to count it as an internship through Edinburgh College.



College Settlement of Philadelphia celebrates the 100th anniversary of their summer camp programs in 2022.

After graduating from Edinburgh, Bonner spent time in California working with a company that gave nature tours but kept coming back to College Settlement every summer in a variety of roles. In 1995, she was offered a full-time position as Program Director, and was actively involved in all aspects of the day camp and teen adventure program. In 1998, Bonner moved to Portland, Oregon where she was the Youth Volunteer Director at the Oregon Zoo, as well as a ski instructor on Mount Hood. In the early 2000s, Bonner returned to the Philadelphia suburbs, this time as Program Director for the overnight camp as well as the Counselor-in-Training program. Early in 2012, Bonner became the full-time Camp Director, a position she has held over the past decade.

"A good chunk of our leadership team at College Settlement is made up of former campers," Bonner said. "That's one of the best parts for me. To see the transition of kids we've known for a long time, to actually then be the supervisors of staff from all around the world. I can't say enough about how special that is. This summer, our international counselors came back, which makes us much richer in diversity again. The international counselors really expand the kids' world, because they bring in songs and activities and stories from all around the world."

The most important thing for Bonner is the continuity of the programs and traditions of College Settlement Camp.

"The heart of the camp hasn't changed," noted Bonner. "We've managed to avoid fads. A while back, someone wanted us to bring in computers for the kids, set up a game room – these are things the kids can get at other places. I've fought hard to keep us unplugged. That gives us the most important thing that we have, time, to listen to the kids, spend time with them, keeping the focal point the conversations and the time spent together. We've traded speed for connection. Camp slows things down and creates connection. In a life with not much stability, it's important for these kids that we have the stability. We're the caretakers of this great tradition, and our job is to pass it along in better shape to the next generation."

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