

Pastor Joel DeMoore

Describe the staff community at Tall Turf.

Working as a counselor is a challenging mission. Counselors who tried to do it themselves were out of there pretty quick. We had to lean on each other. At about 10 PM when the kids were asleep, I would go to the staff lodge to hang out with the other staff and debrief. That was vital. I had a friend named Brandon who had the best laugh in the world. He would laugh it up with me as we told stories of what our kids had done that day. It was therapy that I needed desperately. Without that I wouldn't have made it even three sessions into the summer.

The diversity of our staff was a massive asset. Kids were coming from all different places, and as a white counselor, there were things I just didn't get. I had to learn to lean on and depend on others in leadership. The staff brought all kinds of different skills and levels of understanding. There would be times where I commented on something a kid did without understanding, but then another counselor from a different racial background would explain what was going on. Coming together at the end of the day wasn't a requirement, but we needed it. We needed to understand the traumas and joys of what we'd been through that day.

Talk about a time when you had to ask for help.

One time I had to deal with an ongoing conflict between two kids in my cabin. A much bigger kid was picking on a littler kid of a different race and background. I could sense the conflict from day one of camp. By day three I didn't know how to keep them apart. The whole cabin was starting to turn on him. I went to Robbie Patterson, the camp director, and asked for help. I remember sobbing outside my cabin at night while the kids were all (hopefully) asleep. He laid a big hand on my shoulder and started praying. It made all the difference in the world. I was trying to fix it all myself and that was never going to happen. We ended up having to send the instigator home. Robbie modeled a real gentleness and prayerful presence for me. I had to learn that you don't get through without prayer.

How did your experience at Tall Turf deepen your faith?

One thing that really blessed me at Tall Turf was becoming familiar with another worship tradition. Tall Turf worship was influenced by the Baptist tradition. It was so fun to sing praise songs at the top of our lungs, and to have shouting matches with Rev. B. Campbell: "I love Jesus, how 'bout you?!" I lost my voice trying to emulate him once or twice...

Working at Tall Turf taught me something else about the faith journey: sometimes we need to get past our own felt needs and show enthusiasm even if we don't feel it. For the sake of the mission, we needed to model something for the kids. And it rubbed off on me as I started doing it. I found that when you act your way into rejoicing, you end up rejoicing. You have to play the silly camp games, clap along, dance around, and act like



a goof—because if you don't, you will not hold the kids' attention! When the Apostle Paul says "Rejoice!" he's asking the Philipians to fake it, if they have to, 'til they make it.

How have the values that became important to you at Tall Turf shaped the rest of your life?

In terms of cultural competence, Tall Turf was invaluable. My experience at Tall Turf brought me to a level of comfort in multicultural settings that I don't think I would have otherwise (the level of "beginner"). I'm a pastor at a church in a somewhat low-income neighborhood that was redlined back in the day. A few years ago, my church was partnering with a Christian camp to do a community outreach week of VBS. The camp was a well-oiled machine in terms of running day camps, but the songs, games, and lessons they led were connecting more with our predominantly white congregation than with the richer mosaic of our diverse neighborhood. It wasn't helping us develop relationships with the kids, or equipping them in leadership.

We recognized some of these things and decided to set new goals along the lines of reconciled relationships within the community. We wanted to form deeper relationships with the kids so we could empower them to carry on the mission together, and not just outsource for help. We wanted it to be ministry *with*. We began partnering with Tall Turf, and that has been such a blessing. Tall Turf brought in people who were trained in cross cultural engagement and willing to try different things. Now we're meeting our goals of racial reconciliation and community engagement in a far more holistic way.

What's your favorite tradition from Camp Tall Turf?

When we would drive the bus full of kids into camp, we would sing "We're from Tall Turf, mighty mighty Tall Turf!" It's something that you shout out loud and proud when you enter camp. When the counselors all started chanting, the kids looked at each other in awe like they were thinking, "what are we getting ourselves into?" As a staff, we wondered the same thing... every time.

I also really treasured the honors campfire and passion play. It was so rewarding to see the kids take great pride in the (often silly) awards they received from their counselors, and to see the good news land in good, good soil, as they realized all that Jesus has done for them.