



Meikea Bonnema

How did you grow as a leader at Camp Tall Turf?

Tall Turf showed me in a very tangible way that God will equip me to do what he has called me to do. Every year I choose a word to focus on, and the year I worked at Tall Turf was my year of confidence. I wanted to step out into who God has made me to be. Tall Turf threw me right into situations where I needed to take leadership, and that was really good for me. During orientation, we had to make a fool of ourselves, we had to lead camp stories, we had to talk in front of the whole staff—there were times when I was very scared to do those things. But stepping out like that helped me grow in my confidence exponentially. Once you lead chants in front of 60 campers and all your friends, leading a book club or giving a presentation in class is nothing.

We also learned that leadership doesn't always mean being up front. It also means finding the potential in your campers and pushing them to be leaders. Our leaders told us that one good leadership strategy is finding the natural leader in your cabin and getting them on your side. So I always looked for who my campers were listening to and respecting. I would meet with them one on one and say, "I've noticed some great leadership qualities in you..." Then I would ask them if they could help me with certain things. I would delegate responsibility to them so that my campers were more willing to do what I needed them to do. I'm studying education, and those are skills I want to bring to my classroom one day.

Talk about a situation that expanded your understanding of God.

I realized the power of prayer in a new way at Tall Turf. Because my girls were the oldest age group, I knew there was the potential for a lot of drama and sass. So every week I prayed that God would provide a hedge of protection physically, but also emotionally, over our cabin. For each session I had fantastic girls and our relationships were solid. I didn't feel like that was because of anything I did—I just felt the anointing of the Holy Spirit over that space.

One situation where I really had to rely on prayer came at the end of an eight day session, when campers were starting to get on each others' nerves. I had two campers who had buddied up from the very beginning, and they got into a fight when we were doing our cabin clean up. I saw them standing face to face, yelling at each other, and I didn't know what to do at that moment. No one was around to help, so I asked God to give me the words to say to deescalate the situation. I'm not good at raising my voice, but I felt like God gave me the ability to be firm. I told them we were going to leave the situation there and I would meet with each of them to hear their sides of the story. Before I talked to them individually, I asked God what he wanted the outcome of this situation to be. I felt him prompting me to pray with each of them, even though it felt uncomfortable because they were pretty closed-off. So I heard their sides of the story, and then I prayed with them individually. They were both a little put-off by that—they



thought they were going to get in trouble. When I brought them back together to talk, they said they didn't want to talk to each other. I told them, "I know you guys have a special friendship, and I'd hate to see you lose that, but if you need some space you can do your own thing for a while." They left that conversation without reconciling. Fifteen minutes later they were hanging out like best friends again.

Why was it so valuable to work with a racially diverse staff?

We were able to have authentic conversations about race because our staff was diverse. Talking about institutional racism with people who had a different skin color than me was really eye opening. I had heard stories of black and brown people being disproportionately pulled over by cops or followed into stores, but at Tall Turf I was talking about these things with people I was forming relationships with. These weren't just statistics—they were people I love, people who have prayed over me. As a white person, I can never fully understand the weight of racism, but those conversations helped open my eyes and soften my heart to all that's going on in our society.

That kind of anti-racism training was critical for me as I entered into that summer. I was worried that my campers of color would think I'm just this white girl trying to make sure they were following the Lord. I was also worried that I wouldn't be able to understand or bond with the ones who came from a different background than me. It was really beneficial to talk through my fears with fellow staff who did and didn't look like me.