



Arion Parks

When did you first get involved with Tall Turf?

My family's been a part of Tall Turf for a long time—my uncles and aunts and cousins have all gone. It's in our blood to be part of Tall Turf! I started going as a camper a year earlier than I was supposed to. Then I was a junior leader-in-training. We did a lot of the same training around faith and racial justice that the high school leaders-in-training do, so those things have been implanted in me for a long time. Then when I got to high school I became a leader-in-training (LIT). That gave me my spark to work with kids. Right now I'm studying elementary education at Jackson State University, and I graduate next year. Tall Turf really helped me find my calling.

Tall Turf is my place. It's in my heart. I met people there who I still hang out with to this day. I still remember the songs we came up with based on Bible verses. It's the kind of place that makes you want to come back. You can feel God's love there.

How did Tall Turf stretch you as a leader?

I'm not shy. I always wanted to just jump up and lead. I didn't have a problem with learning to lead—I had to learn how to follow. I learned to listen before I speak—that's why you have two ears and one mouth! I needed to learn how to push someone else and create other leaders, because that's what real leaders are supposed to do.

I had to push the girls in my cabin to be leaders. One year there were two girls in my cabin that already knew each other, so they were always together. One of the girls was the leader of the cabin—every cabin has one. All the other girls wanted to please her and make her laugh. I had talked to her throughout the week and told her I knew she was a good leader and she could set an example for the other campers. We went on a campout, and I didn't want these two girls to be in the same tent. Before I even said anything, the girl I had talked to volunteered to go into a different tent with a shy girl. Sometimes I felt like a broken record, but she was listening the whole time!

What are some stand-out moments from your counselor training?

The racial reconciliation training was my favorite. People start to realize how real racism is. We all got to listen to people who experience racism everyday, and listening to other people is the first step.

In one training session we did the privilege walk. We were all standing shoulder to shoulder, and we moved forward if we could answer "yes" to statements like "my parents own land" or "I have never been racially profiled" It was designed to show us white privilege, because white people end up in the front. It allows people to see that



they can use their privilege to support others instead of trying to deny it. People try to deny their white privilege, but it's there—people of color see it every day.

Why is it important for counselors at Tall Turf to talk about racial justice?

It was important for the staff to learn about the difference between equity and equality. We can't just treat all the kids the same because they're all coming from different backgrounds. We can't be as harsh on a kid who cusses all the time if that kid comes from a background where it's okay for them to cuss. Every job should do that kind of training—especially school teachers! It's important to learn about the culture of the kids you're teaching instead of assuming you can treat everyone equally. That's not equity.

How have you seen God working at Tall Turf?

I have a memory of praying after we watched a movie about Jesus' crucifixion. We created a prayer circle. I get chills everytime I think about it. I felt the Holy Spirit in the room. Other people were praying for me—I hadn't even told people what I was going through, but they were praying for that stuff. That's when I knew for sure that God is real and God is love.

I got to see transformation in my campers, too. They're at the age where it's not "cool" to openly show that you're a Christian. But they look up to you as their counselor. I would always tell my campers, "You can know the new dances, the new trends, but at the end of the day you need to know who you're serving." At the beginning of the week my girls didn't want to lead Bible studies. I told them I wasn't going to lead every night. By the end of the week, they volunteered to do it—they would get mad if I chose somebody else to lead! And they all got closer when they started to lead the Bible studies. You get really close with people when you're telling each other your business and trusting them.

What's your favorite Tall Turf tradition?

I love getting thrown in the lake. It holds people accountable—if you're late you get thrown in the lake. I also love creating a song for the Bible verse of the week. I still remember those verses because of the songs! We taught the kids to do it throughout the week and then they remember it for a long time.