

Award Winning Camp Needs Community Help
By KATHY LEIGH BERKOWITZ
Staff Writer

A local award-winning camp has had their lights turned out because of unpaid electric bills and is in need of community support. In an interview Tuesday, Brady Millican, president of the board for the Florida Lion's Camp in Lake Wales, said the camp is about \$14,000 in arrears with the Peace River Electric Company. Millican, who has been the board president for a year, said the camp was struggling when he arrived, largely due to the death blow from Hurricane Charley, when the insurance company didn't pay the camp what it incurred in losses as a result of the disaster. It was a 'devastating development,' he said, when certain commitments at the end of the fiscal year in September were not met. One of the first things Millican did when he came to the camp was to work up a business plan, including fundraisers and features to seek alternate sources of income.

The camp's service went from 70 children supported at a budget of \$650,000, to several hundred on roughly the same budget, and has broadened its scope to include not just the visually impaired, but the medically fragile, and even the autistic. For the kids, it is a place to let down their guard and be a kid like other children who enjoy going to summer camp. Underneath the mossy trees they laugh and play. Millican said it is not unusual during camp to see a transformation in a child. Often, because their families shelter them to protect them from society, the kids will be quiet, even to themselves, when camp starts on Sunday. But before long, they sense the camp is a camp about them, for them. By Friday, Millican said, they are singing camp songs, laughing, and crying all at once, frolicking in the freedom of their souls. 'That's the beauty and the magic of the Lion's Camp,' he said. A wide selection of traditional summer camp activities are available, including swimming, canoeing, fishing, hiking, camping out and cooking over a fire, games, arts and crafts, singing and dancing, hay-wagon rides, challenge courses and much more. Activities are adapted to the age and ability of each camper to ensure maximum participation, safety and fun, according to the Florida Lion's Camp website.

The financial challenges of keeping it all going have served to be a constant strain on the camp, though. Millican said the camp worked on keeping its accounts payable within the ninety day range, but still owes a few vendors, as well as a three month old electric bill. The camp arranged for Peace River Electric to come out and do an energy audit to show the camp where they could curb electricity. Replacing aged electrical equipment has been a work in progress, Millican said. 'We are trying our best,' he added, 'the camp staff definitely excels at what they do, they have a very good attitude and are always mission oriented first.'

Barbara Cage, the executive director of the camp for the last 11 years, agrees. 'The mission of this camp is so wonderfully unique and not only gives a world of good' to our campers, but also is the training ground for tomorrow's future leaders around the world,' Cage said. 'A good example of that is how quickly our on-site staff recovered from finding themselves faced without the simple amenities of electricity and limited water/sewage. Instead of complaining about their own inconveniences, they worked on finding a way to get a computer hooked up to a generator so that we could keep fighting the battle to save our camp. Don't feel sorry for us, feel sorry for those individuals that dare to stand in the way of success for something we believe in so strongly.'

Cage and her family run the camp, following a tradition in campsites around America, Millican said, while noting that 87% of all camps are run by families. 'This family definitely has a passion for the mission,' he said. Likewise

mirroring Cage's positive attitude, he adds the "Florida Lion's Camp truly takes the 'IM' out of the Impossible." "We do need everybody's help and support" he said. They have no doubt the camp will pull through this time, choosing instead of discouragement to persevere for better times and find ways to help fund the 58 acre camp that houses children and adults from around the world. The Florida Lion's Camp is an accredited member of the American Camp Association, an accomplishment that is only met by meeting or exceeding 300 out of 336 objectives. The first year of their accreditation they received a score of 98 percent, and received a perfect score of 100 percent in 2001 and 2004. Holding to that standard, they only dropped by a point to 99 percent in 2007 due to hurricane damage. Because of the quality and integrity of the camp, they have been the proud recipients of several awards, the most notable of which include special recognition for excellence in camp programming for the Sibling & Friends sessions in 2001, Camp America's P.E.A.C.E. (Providing Excellent Avenues for Cultural Exchange) award in 2004, the CCUSA Camp Director of the Year in 2006, and two joint awards with the Together We See Foundation in 2008, and Aunt Annie's "A Twist on Giving Back" and the newly created Community Service Award from the southeast American Camp Association. The camp website says all individuals, five years of age or older, are eligible to attend camp, adding their goal is to "enhance the quality of life for our campers through a diversity of experiences and instill self-worth and independence for those who are visually or otherwise challenged."

Any donations to the Florida Lion's Camp can be made by sending them in care of Stacy Byrd at the SunTrust Bank at the Lake Wales downtown branch. She can also be reached by telephone at 863-679-1384 or e-mail at stacy.byrd@suntrust.com. Donations can also be made in three ways: Online at their url www.lionscampfl.org; checks to 2819 Tiger Lake Road, Lake Wales FL 33898; or any of the SunTrust Banks in Lake Wales can accept donations. (Kathy Leigh Berkowitz can be reached via e-mail at klberkowitz@lakewalesnews.com.)

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