

The Great Escape

Out in the country, 2 miles down an old dirt road in Charlotte County sitting under the largest oak hammock in Southwest Florida, sits an escape. An escape for young boys to find themselves. An escape for them to learn how to become respectful and responsible young men. This escape was my home for 16 months, this escape I am speaking of is Gator Wilderness Camp/School.

When I was younger I was not always the happiest kid. I, like a lot of young boys went through some struggles. Struggles with my family, with school, and with making friends. I found it hard to talk out some of the things I was feeling, like when something made me angry, I would not talk about it but instead have what we at my house called "rages". I would get so upset and angry over some of the smallest things and say things I shouldn't have and I would tear things up in my room. It was really hard on my relationship with my family. Some of the things I was feeling also made it hard on me at school. My grades were not that great and I really didn't have any friends. Well I had one friend until he moved away. I guess you would say I was a loner. I shut down, I couldn't talk to my parents about these feelings without it becoming an argument. I kind of went into a depression, I lost focus of the real me and what was important to me and my life. As time went on and I got a little older these feelings and struggles became worse and even harder to deal with. My parents became frustrated, they just didn't know what to do to help me. Our relationship as a family became more strained and some of the behaviors and feelings I had really took its toll on all of us at home. Until one day my Mom spoke to a counselor about a place where boys could go and work on these struggles and the problems they were having, Gator Camp, the great escape!

My Mom had a hard time agreeing to let me go at first. See this is a year round Camp where not only do I work on school but I live there too. The thing is it wasn't just her decision to make it was mine. I had to agree to this, I had to make my very first big life decision. It was a decision I am glad I decided to go through with. I started camp when I was 14 years old and getting ready to start my freshman year of High School. It was August 1, 2013 the day I started, and little did I know at the time just how much being under those oak trees was going to change my life. I met the Chief's, (they are our adult group leaders) and the Camp Director and we went over some things together and talked about some of the things I would be experiencing. The next thing I had to do was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do and that was say goodbye to my family. I was going to be with people I didn't know and in a strange place, and to be honest I was a little nervous, but I was excited to. Excited about the new beginning I was getting ready to make for myself.

I won't say Camp was always easy, it was pretty tough sometimes. I missed my family, my room at home, my bed, and the little things you grow to appreciate when you no longer have them every day. There were rules set in place for me that I didn't have before, there were chores that had to be done each day, and there were goals that I had to meet, goals I had to come up with on my own. There were 10 boys in our group, we were called the Buccaneers. We all ranged from ages 14-16, and we didn't always see eye to eye on things. All of the boys in the Buccaneers were going through some of the same struggles and problems. Most of us have parents that are divorced, some of us were diagnosed with ADHD, and some got involved with the wrong crowds and got in trouble with the law. So many different experiences but still the same to a point. Even though we all had our issues we were all in this together, we had to depend on each other to call the other one out if there was something that was not going

right, we had to depend on each other to get through the rough patches, and we had to pull together to make it as a successful united group. We had our arguments we even had our fist fights, but at the end of the day when we all sat and reflected back on what happened during our day, we talked about the good and the bad things that happened, made some plans for the next day, and said our apologies.

Life at Gator Camp is not for everybody. Whenever I would tell someone about camp and how we lived they are really surprised. But for me I loved living there, you camp out year round! That's right you camp out that means no air conditioning, no TV, no phone, no computers and no video games. Our beds are in sleep tents that are all open. Our beds have mosquito screens over them and we have a fan at the end of our beds. In the winter it gets really cold under the oak trees, and it takes forever for it to warm up. We don't have a typical bathroom we have something called a privy, again all open and outside. All the sleep tents, cook tents, and structures in the campsites were all built by the boys that lived there. We have our cook tent which one of my favorite things to do on Wednesdays and Thursdays was cook out at our campsite. We had to plan our own menus and the budget to buy what we needed for the meal. On the other days we ate our meals in chuck wagon, which is like a cafeteria. It takes some getting used to but once you learn the routine your golden. We have a big lake and a smaller pond there on the property. I forgot to mention Gator Wilderness Camp sits on 250 acres. So there is plenty of room for all of us to do great outdoor activities. We swim a lot in the lake, we are able to fish to. One great memory I have of the lake is the day I overcame my fear of heights. We have a platform that has a swing rope we can use to swing on and jump into the water. As nervous as I was I managed to swing out off of the platform and jumped in the water, I tackled my fear and got rewarded for it after. We did a lot of hiking on the property, we always found something interesting while we were out walking around. But I think my favorite thing to do was help take care of the horses. Yes we had horses, what other school has horses and cows? None that I have seen. I learned so much about them and learned something new about myself in the process, I have a deep love for them. Just being around the horses helped me forget some of my struggles and problems. Every day there was something new to do and something new to learn.

Some of the very best days were the days we were on our field trips. These were not just any old field trips, these were adventures! My very first trip was up to North Florida for a tubing trip down the Ichetucknee River, it's up around Blue Springs, and runs into the Santé Fe River. The water there is so clear you can see the bottom, and it was colder than most rivers because it is spring feed. My next trip and this was a big one, was to the Foothills in North and South Carolina where we hiked for 11 days. All together we hiked 74 miles. This trip we took in the fall, so it was chilly up in the mountains. All the trees were changing colors, I have never been able to experience the season of fall until this trip. My next big trip was a 9 day canoe and camping trip through the 10,000 Islands and the Everglades. We did a lot of fishing and we saw so many different animals on this trip. We woke up on the beach every morning to waves crashing and some of the most amazing sun rises you could ever imagine. Another awesome trip was when we went to Cayo Costa. That trip was a 4 day canoe and camping trip. We canoed 9 miles out to the island and camped for 4 days. We fished a lot, we caught a couple of small sharks which was really cool, and found some really cool things while we walked around the island. We took 2 trips down the Suwanee River. These trips where 7 day canoe and camping trips. There were tons of turtles and birds, and the fishing was good. Some of the trips we took together, they were once in a lifetime trips for some of us. The things we learned and the things we saw will always be some of the greatest life

experiences for me and I will always be grateful for the opportunity to be able to be a part of these adventures.

One of the most important things I experienced at Gator Camp was getting to know the Chief's, the Staff and all the Boy's there. The boys in my Buccaneers Group, they were my brothers. Like I said we didn't always see eye to eye on things, but they helped me in ways that I never knew they would be able to. I realize that more now than I did while I was still there. All of the times they called me out when I was not the nicest person to be around, all the things we learned together, and the friendships I developed with them will always be a big part of my life and I will never be able to forget them. The Staff, they were all awesome. Especially Ms. Ida, she was our camp cook. She made the best pies and she also made the best whoopie pies, they are a type of soft cookie. I will just say that we always worked for an extra whoopie pie. Our Camp Director is Chief Greg, and he is the one who helped me find my love of horses. He is one of most honest people I have ever met. If he felt you weren't being honest about your feelings or about something that was going on he would call you out on it every time. He was great about getting to the heart of the problem and getting it resolved. When he spoke you listened! Ms. Rhinda was our Family Worker, she worked with my Mom and Step Dad a lot. My Mom will say she was her "Life Line" while I was at camp. She worked on making sure I had everything I needed while I was there and kept my parents updated on everything. Chief Corey, Chief Ben, and Chief Curtis they were my Supervising Chiefs. They worked with all the groups at camp. They made sure we were doing the right thing in our groups, they helped our group Chiefs when they needed something or one of us boys needed an extra hand when we were having a problem. Chief Corey was the bug expert, he could tell you everything about any bug at any time. Chief Ben and Chief Curtis always knew exactly when I needed an extra hand. They both knew when I got that look in my eye that I needed some extra attention. They took the time to talk to me and help me work out my problems, and most of all they were my friends when I really needed one. Chief Mitch and Chief Doug were our group Chiefs, they stayed with us at our campsite all of the time. Chief Doug was new to our group, he was only there a little while before I graduated but he was a great person. He too was always there when I needed him, even when I wasn't the very nicest person to be around. He encouraged me to always to do my best and be a better person. Same with Chief Mitch, he never gave up on me. He always talked me through my problems and even gave me an extra kick in the pants when I had an attitude. He never gave up on me and taught me to never give up on myself no matter how hard life got. All the staff at Camp was very supportive of all the boys. They helped us when most people really didn't even want to be around us. They taught us all how to be respectful and how to be grateful for what we have in our lives at home.

I graduated Camp on December 21, 2014, I was there 16 months. I had to come back home to my family and learn how to live with them all over again. I started school in January and let me say that was hard to get used to again. But there is one thing I know from my experiences of being at Gator Camp. Life is going to be hard, things are not always going to go my way. I have to step up and be strong and learn to live my life the right way. Even through those tough times I have to push through and be the best I can be, not for anyone else, but for me and for my life. I still have struggles, struggles that I will probably always have, but I will not let them hold me back from being happy and doing what I need to do to be a good person. One thing that sticks in my mind that I learned from being at Camp is that no matter what, I have to OWN the decisions and choices I make no matter if they are good or bad. No one else can do this for me, I have to do what is right for me. So when I'm asked "do you miss Camp", "would go back to camp if you could"? My answer is and will always be "yes"! I will always grateful for the experiences I

had, the adventures I went on, and all of the friendships I made while I was under that Oak Hammock (if those old oaks could talk). It will always be my greatest escape!

By: Mason Hull