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A Unique Program for Children Affected by Addiction: An Interview with Karen Moyer and Brian Maus

William L. White

Introduction

American concerns about the effects of excessive parental drinking and drug use on their children span the earliest days of the nineteenth century temperance movement to this morning's news. In light of this expressed concern, it is surprising after 150+-years of addiction treatment in the United States, screening and services to children of parents undergoing addiction treatment remains extremely rare. As a result, the cutting edge of responses to the needs of these children has been within organizations outside the mainstream treatment system. One highly unique response to these needs is the Moyer Foundation's Camp Mariposa project. In January of 2014 I had the opportunity to interview Karen Moyer and Brian Maus about the history, operations and future of Camp Mariposa and the larger cultural response to the needs of children affected by addiction. Karen is co-founder and vice president of The Moyer Foundation and Brian is the Camp Mariposa Program Manager. Please join us in this conversation.

The Moyer Foundation

Bill White: Karen, perhaps we could begin with some background on The Moyer Foundation.

Karen Moyer: The Moyer Foundation started in 2000 when my husband Jamie and I decided to incorporate our work with the Seattle Mariners and other Seattle organizations to help children experiencing distress. For a decade, we had this very broad mission, but over time we became experts on children affected by grief or by addiction, and we now focus primarily on serving children in these areas through our two camp initiatives, Camp Mariposa and Camp Erin. We are also expanding and partnering with like-minded organizations that can help support the development of our campers into adulthood. With Camp Mariposa, we are particularly interested in helping break the intergenerational cycle of addiction. By forging a coalition of organizations who share this vision, we hope to reach as many of these kids as we can.

History of Mariposa Camp

Bill White: Brian, what are the historical roots of Camp Mariposa?

Brian Maus: Camp Mariposa began with Karen and Jamie's vision of wanting to offer resources to young children impacted by addiction and they quickly turned to Claudia Black, a pioneer in this arena. Recognizing the strengths of the camp experience with Camp Erin, and also wanting to reach children often from less advantaged family systems, their collaboration led to partnering with local organizations and experts working with children who also understand the dynamics of addiction in the family. Seattle was our only location from 2007 until the end of 2011 when we

began to expand the network nationally. We took what we learned in Seattle and now have opened camps in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Florida, as well as two locations in California. Our goal is to open a camp in Washington, D.C by the end of 2014. As we've learned over the past several years, the need for the type of support that Camp Mariposa provides is tremendous.

Partnership Structure

Bill White: Could you describe the partnership model used to develop these Camp Mariposa experiences?

Brian Maus: Sure. Traditionally, we've looked for mental health or substance abuse organizations that have deep connections in their local community as our partners. We conduct extensive research and ultimately select a group to partner with in each of the communities where we want to host a Camp Mariposa. More recently, we've also begun to partner with strong, youth-focused organizations with excellent reputations for serving at-risk kids. We've been influenced by research that has found that prevention and early intervention programs are most effective when they involve community, school, and family. San Diego Youth Services, our partner for Camp Mariposa San Diego, is a good example of kind of the groups that we've recently partnered with. They work primarily with homeless youth providing a range of services, including mental health and substance abuse counseling. They're well-connected in the community with particularly strong relationships with the local school districts. Camp Mariposa San Diego opened in August of 2013 at full capacity, and we've actually had to add slots over the last six months to meet the demand for services.

Bill White: What are the respective roles of The Moyer Foundation and your community partner?

Brian Maus: Our community partners host the free, weekend overnight camps, and the Foundation provides three years of initial funding totaling \$150,000 to establish and operate the local Camp Mariposa. The funding is structured so that most if not all of the first year costs are covered so that our partner can focus on recruiting campers, getting camp up and running, and offering a solid program. In addition to funding, we also provide a best practice guide that includes everything our partners need to know to launch and successfully run a Camp Mariposa weekend. The best practices guide was developed in consultation with Claudia Black and incorporates activities from SAMHSA's Children's Program Kit. We also provide a communications toolkit so that the partners can effectively market the camp in their local community. We provide a lot of ongoing support for the camp directors and their staff. For example, we have a quarterly camp director's call to share best practices, ideas and new activities that are working well. Finally, we provide our partners with water bottles, t-shirts, sleeping bags, and other camp supplies so that attending camp isn't a financial burden on the camper and their families.

Bill White: With that structure, is there a similar experience if I went to the camp in Philadelphia and the camp in L.A?

Brian Maus: Yes, there are common elements. There's always an opening ceremony that includes the story of how Camp Mariposa began. There's a letter-writing exercise. There's a closing ceremony. And there are team bonding activities throughout, but then each camp provides four to six educational activities and enrichment activities that can vary based on the local needs of the children participating. Because children that attend camp may still be living in a home with actively addicted families, we strongly emphasize self-care skills to help them cope and thrive after returning home. There is also an expectation that camps operate with a high staff-to-kid ratio, especially when considering the population of kids being served. We provide a suggested format that our partners are free to refine to address local and cultural needs. We encourage our partners to do different activities because kids come multiple times and we want these activities to be engaging over time.

Bill White: Karen, I understand that a number of the children you serve are not currently living with their families. Could you talk about that a bit?

Karen Moyer: We serve some kids whose parents are incarcerated and other kids who are not currently living with their parents. Many of the children we serve are currently in foster homes. I've been so privileged to visit camps in Indiana, Seattle, Philadelphia and San Diego, many of them multiple times. The San Diego camp started some months ago and that has allowed me to go to the first three sessions and to be part of hearing the campers' stories, supporting them and motivating them. Each camp is unique, but it's always amazing to see the transformations that can unfold between a Friday and a Sunday, and the changes that take place in these children as I see them month after month. It is quite remarkable.

Bill White: What do you think distinguishes the sort of Camp Mariposa model from other projects serving children affected by addiction?

Karen Moyer: We are grateful for the resources that are available and do exist, but there is just so little available for this age group. We are reaching children before they are appropriate for Alateen or for the kind of services available for older youth. As the onset of alcohol and drug problems is affecting younger people in the U.S., it is our belief that breaking cycles of addiction requires getting to these youth at as young an age as possible. A child who comes to our camp may have difficulty making friends, but is able find new friends and increased self-esteem and self-confidence from their camp experience. Such children may even become a leader within the camp meetings. Now, if they're taking that information and support home to their siblings, the siblings could also be positively affected. If they're taking that to their school, they could affect their peers. There's so much hope at Camp Mariposa for these children. I encourage the kids who "age out" to consider coming back to Camp Mariposa to work as a counselor to help teach the seven C's of addiction, which include: you didn't cause it, you can't cure it and you can't control it. I think what kids get at the camp can be life-saving.

Brian Maus: Another distinctive feature is that Camp Mariposa is designed for kids to come multiple times. In designing it this way, the educational information and self-care strategies are reinforced over a period of months or years. Children are also able to form relationships with

other campers who understand what they are going through at home. So you see this process of group cohesion and support that Karen was describing. There's a core group that develops after a couple sessions. Members of this core become leaders in the group and they support each other and new members as they enter. The older kids who've been coming to camp for a couple sessions take on this leadership role and welcome new kids who may be initially shy and hesitant to get involved.

Another thing unique about Camp Mariposa is that the program is designed so that kids attend by themselves. This allows us to reach kids who do not have a parent/caretaker who can attend each weekend session. Finally, Camp Mariposa is free to all campers, more than 80% of whom come from low-income backgrounds. This allows us to serve more children who lack the resources to pay even a nominal amount.

Bill White: How many children have been served since Camp Mariposa began?

Brian Maus: As of the end of 2013, we've had about 1,300 campers -- 435 unduplicated kids, with most campers attending an average of three weekend sessions.

Future of Camp Mariposa

Bill White: Karen, what is your vision for the future of Camp Mariposa?

Karen Moyer: Well, I'm an advocate for children experiencing any type of distress. I believe that Camp Mariposa can help one child at a time get through these difficult life transitions. My vision is to reach as many kids as we can. We now have more than 40 grief camps throughout the United States and Camp Mariposa is on a similar growth path. I'm confident when I say we can break the cycle of addiction. Many of the kids we serve are making different choices. They're not repeating the family cycles that preceded them. We CAN break the cycle of addiction.

Bill White: Brian, would you add to that?

Brian Maus: Our goal is to add two new locations a year for the next five years. By 2019, our goal is to have fifteen locations and ninety camps annually serving more than 2,000 campers a year.

Bill White: Karen, are there specific fundraising projects used by The Moyer Foundation to raise money to expand the camps?

Karen Moyer: Yes. We are entirely dependent on fundraising to expand these camps and serve more children. Right now, we host an annual event in Seattle where we have an office and an annual event in Philadelphia. Our major fundraiser is our golf tournament and we are always looking for additional corporate and individual supporters. We've also explored government funding as a source to expand the camps.

Larger Cultural Responses to the Needs of Affected Children

Bill White: How would you judge how we're doing as a country in responding to the needs of children affected by addiction?

Karen Moyer: I don't even know where to begin. I certainly can talk about the billions of dollars that we spend but it's unclear how little of that goes to the pre-adolescent ages we are targeting. I had this idea nine years ago to serve an age group that is still not on people's radar. Why aren't we focusing on the next generation? We have not done enough and the future health of the country hinges on our changing that.

Brian Maus: I think it's an exciting time to be working in prevention and particularly working with kids with a family history of addiction. There's been an explosion of knowledge about addiction that we need to apply. There's going to be a greater prevention focus within the Affordable Care Act and that gives me hope. What we have been doing up until this point is analogous to telling someone who is showing signs of developing diabetes, "Well, there's nothing we can do now but come back when you have full-blown diabetes and then we can provide you with all kinds of services." We need to move towards identifying kids who are at risk or may be developing an addiction and intervening at these earlier stages to provide a lot of ongoing educational and therapeutic support.

Bill White: Do either of you have recommendations for addiction treatment organizations or local recovery community organizations on how they could more effectively respond to the needs of children affected by addiction?

Brian Maus: I am hopeful that some funding through the Affordable Care Act will increase the focus on the needs of children living with addiction in their family. I also think there is great potential in mobilizing the recovery community around the needs of children. Karen and I have had conversations with people from recovery communities who want to get involved in this work.

Final Reflections

Bill White: Is there anything we haven't touched on so far about Camp Mariposa that you feel is important?

Brian Maus: I guess the only thing that we really didn't talk about was that the camps are really fun. Most of the time during the camp weekends, you're not going to know that it's a camp about addiction. It could be any other kind of camp with all these other great things. Kids are laughing. They're going on nature hikes. They're having campfires at night and eating s'mores and staying up late. That's what kids need - they need healthy opportunities to grow - and they need to know they aren't alone. Our partners send us post-camp reports that include each kid's written response to the camp experience. So many times kids say, "I didn't know there were other kids like me, I didn't know other families struggled with a mom or dad who drank." The kids we serve have fun, they begin to heal and they start to learn how to cope.

Bill White: Karen, anything you would add?

Karen Moyer: I think it's important to understand that we help the kids celebrate themselves, which might be very unique for them and may have never happened up until this point. We also encourage the kids to do behavioral things that encourage them to experience life beyond what they have in the past and that is beautiful to witness. Also, each kid writes a letter to the person who is addicted or to the addiction or the drug. They then have the option of sharing the letter with everybody in one of our circle meetings. Then we burn the letters in a form of a letting go process. Kids get very emotional through this healing and strengthening ritual.

The one last thing is that Camp Mariposa is a free camp for the children that participate. Our direct cost is about \$500 per camper so we are always looking for financial support to continue this work. Anyone wishing to contribute to this work can do so at

<http://www.moyerfoundation.org/donate>

Bill White: Karen and Brian, thank you for taking this time to discuss Camp Mariposa and thank you for all you have done and are doing for children affected by addiction.

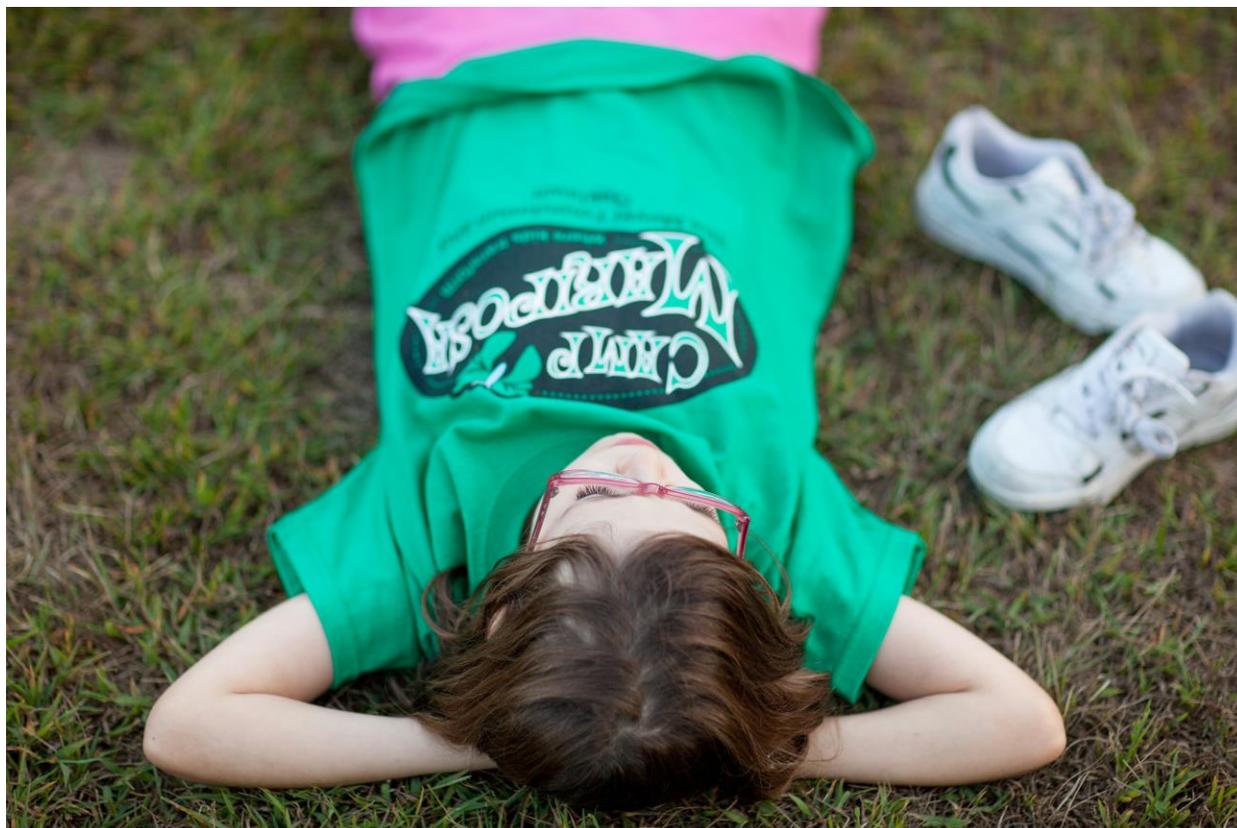
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Many Camp Mariposa locations offer challenge course activities to create opportunities for confidence-building and peer-bonding. (Photo courtesy The Moyer Foundation)



Peer-bonding and reducing feelings of isolation, fear, guilt, and loneliness are very important elements of the camp weekend. (Photo courtesy OMG Photography)



One recent quote from a camper was “Camp Mariposa helped me by doing mindfulness which helps me take in my surroundings.” (Photo courtesy OMG Photography)



Camp Mariposa creates a fun, safe environment for campers to talk about the addiction in their family without fear of being judged. (Photo courtesy OMG Photography)