

My Ferrwood story began in 2005, my first year as a day camper. I remember it like it was yesterday: rehearsing my drum parts on a practice pad balanced on a wobbly table under a tent, playing games like “trainwreck” in the field, and eating smores at night. I even entered the talent show, playing a song on the piano. It was an original composition with only three chords, and lasted a good four minutes! Most importantly, I remember the people: fellow campers, instructors, and counselors whom I admired. It was such an open community of people, willing to accept me as I was: a weird 9-year-old, always sunburnt, obsessed with music, with WAY too much energy. Ferrwood is a place where being different is celebrated, not shied away from. A place where you can truly learn to love yourself. Every camper was encouraged and supported, regardless of their musical ability. I loved every second of it... and needless to say, that first year was the ONLY year I attended camp for just a single week.

This focus on individuality and respect for others embodies Fr. Joe's mentality, "If you become a great musician, that is a bonus. I'm here to make you a good person". From the chore assignments, to volunteers working behind the scenes, to playing in ensembles - teamwork is what makes camp work. Ferrwood is an amazing place that uses music education to teach collaboration, responsibility, and cooperation.

One of the other aspects of Ferrwood that I loved early on was volunteering - whether it was to help clean the camp in the spring and early summer, assisting parents to prepare food and drinks in the kitchen, or setting up the sound system for camp events throughout the week. Everyone at camp always treated me as their equal, even when I was only a fraction of their age. They didn't see my young age and lack of experience as a bad thing, but rather, recognized my love and

passion for Ferrwood, and helped me channel my enthusiasm in constructive ways. This created an environment that allowed me to thrive... even when camp wasn't in session. That's one of the things that makes Ferrwood such a fascinating place... the symbiotic relationship that exists: the more of yourself you give to Ferrwood, the more you will receive in return. Lifelong lessons, friends, and memories.

I continued to attend as a camper through 2012. Throughout those pivotal years, I grew from a child to a teenager, improved from a beginner to an intermediate musician, and matured as a young member of the community. My experiences at Ferrwood helped shape who I was becoming and helped foster my love for volunteering, leadership, music, and community. The instructors and counselors I looked up to were incredible teachers and inspired me to use teaching as a tool in my everyday life. I was involved in more extracurricular activities than I can now remember. Some highlights (outside of my responsibilities at camp) were: attending the National Young Leaders Conference in Washington D.C., competing at the national level in Future Business Leaders of America, leading a team of students in The Luzerne Foundation's Youth Advisory Committee, and being a multi-year participant, trainer, and advisor for the International Student Leadership Institute.

After graduating from high school, I had the honor and privilege to serve as a Ferrwood Camp Counselor for several years. This opportunity allowed me to be even more involved with the planning and preparation process leading up to camp. Most importantly, being a counselor allowed me to give back and inspire campers who were in the same shoes I had been in just a few years before. For me, this was truly a dream come true.

As a camp counselor, I also grew close to one of my lifelong best friends (you learn a lot about someone after sleeping next to them for 2 straight weeks in the counselor's room). The two of us have become like brothers. We always emphasized making camp fun for everyone, whether that meant inventing games, making bonfires, or doing intense Zumba workouts! Outside of our time together at camp, we constantly support each other and make each other laugh. I am happy to say we are now looking forward to being each other's "Best Man" in both of our upcoming wedding ceremonies!

Looking back on my time at Ferrwood, I am struck by how much it impacted my life and the person I have become. Ferrwood was much more than just a music camp. The friendships I formed there were some of the strongest and most enduring of my life. I credit the camp's focus on teamwork, responsibility, community-building, inclusivity, and FUN for fostering those relationships. Even as a counselor, I found myself drawing on the lessons I learned as a camper to help guide and support the next generation of Ferrwood campers. The way in which Ferrwood serves as both a safe haven (a place where different kinds of people can come together to be their genuine, authentic selves) and a springboard (to inspire campers to leave camp continuing to act with respect and kindness out in the real world) is truly hard to come by. All of this is why I continue to give back to camp as much as possible by volunteering my time, providing my expertise, and sponsoring campers by donating camperships to those in need. It's well worth the drive in from New York City each summer to spend time getting my hands dirty, hearing the sounds of pianos being played in the kitchen, and seeing the smiles on every camper's face.

In my adult life, I have continued to pursue music as a hobby - editing, recording, and mixing audio. I sometimes even sit down in front of the piano during the holidays to play a few Christmas carols! However, I know that camp instilled in me a sense of discipline, dedication, and empathy that has guided me in all aspects of my life. My involvement at Ferrwood, first as a child, then as a teenager, was instrumental in me becoming the man I am today. Whether I am volunteering in my community, teaching, working, or simply striving to be a good fiancé (and future parent), I know that Ferrwood helped shape me into the person I am today. I wish nothing more for my own future children, as well the entire next generation and generations to come, than for them to have a place like Ferrwood to learn and grow.