



THE ELM PROJECT

ENCOURAGE | LEAD | MENTOR

Camp AmeriKids | Leader-In-Training Program

## FY 2021 Final Report

**Phil Zwickler Charitable and Memorial Foundation Trust**

**Amount Received: \$2,000**



*The ELM Project enhances the lives of underserved youth living with chronic illness by providing an enriching summer camp experience and the tools for a healthy, independent future.*

### **Organization Statistics for FY 2021**

- Served **89** campers and junior counselors from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania through Camp AmeriKids in August 2021.
- Offered a variety of in-person activities at Camp AmeriKids this summer including swimming, arts & crafts, sports, drama, music & song writing, dance, and more.
- Focused on the safety and well-being of our campers with the support of **15** volunteer medical staff who implemented our strict COVID protocols.
- Continued our Leader-in-Training Program virtually, serving **20** teens each month.
- Sent over **180** Holiday Party care packages to campers, LITs, and their siblings which included special, individualized gifts for each child in the family.



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## General Update

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to negatively impact the lives of the children and families that we serve. Some of our children have been isolated from their peers for nearly two years, and our families have experienced financial hardship and unimaginable loss. The limited amount of in-person programming and socialization opportunities has taken a toll on our population. The ELM Project staff, Board of Directors and volunteers felt it was necessary to do everything we could to offer in-person programming this year, as we understand the importance of having a supportive community. In partnership with our Medical Director, Dr. Haamid Chamdawala, as well as many other health professionals, we were able to achieve quite a lot, as detailed below. **We are so proud of what we accomplished in 2021 and the Phil Zwickler Foundation's generous donation helped us serve our children both virtually and in-person!**

## Camp AmeriKids 2021

After taking a break from in-person activities in 2020 due to COVID, we were thrilled to celebrate our 26<sup>th</sup> summer of Camp AmeriKids in 2021! We made many changes to accommodate strict COVID protocols but kept as many of our traditions as possible. Our theme this year was **"Lights! Camera! Camp!"**. After two years of anticipation, we provided **89** campers and Junior Counselors with a week filled of adventure, exploration, friendship, and a touch of madness. We had a spy-themed code-breaking challenge, an obstacle course, and our classic evening talk show with Camp AmeriKids celebrity, Bobby Bubbles.

During the day we offered dance, drama, swim, boating, sports, and arts & crafts. In addition, we partnered with a small non-profit called 'Hear Your Song' who provided music and song writing to our campers. In the evenings we offered plenty of outdoor group activities, such as our annual Lip Sync Battle and Talent Show, as well as new events like giant celebrity 'Guess Who?'. Our new campsite in Monticello, NY, owned by Camp Kennybrook, offered our campers a challenging ropes course and climbing wall, as well as an incredible heated pool with a large slide. Despite the many challenges that arose due to COVID, we successfully provided an amazing week full of fun for our campers.



*A camper working on an Arts & Crafts project with one of their counselors – who is also a former camper!*

For many of our participants, Camp AmeriKids is the only place where they can try new things in a safe and supportive environment. Camp is where the children begin to build a foundation of social support



*Fun on the waterslide at our new campsite!*

networks, leadership skills, friendship, teamwork, and responsibility, which carries well beyond just one week every summer. Despite the challenges and difficulties that a global pandemic brought to our work this year, The ELM Project staff, Board, and volunteers knew it was essential for us to provide our families with in-person programming. We had **89** participants living with the struggles of sickle cell disease, HIV, and other chronic illnesses in

attendance. This is lower than a typical year, but still an incredible accomplishment given challenges related to COVID and the strict protocols we implemented. We required all staff to be fully vaccinated before volunteering and had everyone onsite (including campers) provide proof of a negative PCR test within five days of arrival, as well testing again on arrival day (both PCR and rapid tests). We took twice daily temperature checks and maintained social distancing among cabin groups as much as possible. We adjusted our activities to prevent mixing between age groups and were able to keep everyone safe and healthy and prevent any COVID outbreaks from occurring throughout the week!

### **Volunteers and Staff**

We are committed to keeping high standards for our volunteers and staff. Many of our volunteers have been with The ELM Project for several years, some for more than 15 or 20! Despite the strict protocols, challenges of learning a new campsite, and living in the middle of a global pandemic, our volunteers stepped up as they always do. We welcomed **81** new and returning volunteers, including **16** former campers who remain dedicated to our mission.

Our Wellness Team was comprised of five childcare experts who are trained to address any psychosocial issues that arise throughout the week. They support both our campers and volunteers, manage any conflicts, and address potential stressors related to our camper's home and school lives. In addition, we had an incredible Medical Team of **15** professionals led



*The Raccoon cabin (10–11-year-old girls) in a fun group photo with their counselors and Junior Counselors during Carnival Day at Camp AmeriKids 2021.*

by our Medical Director, who is a Pediatric Emergency Room Physician at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, as well as one additional Pediatrician, two Nurse Practitioners, and eleven Nurse Practitioner (NP) students. Our NP students are all certified nurses in the State of New York and come to us through partnerships with Columbia University and D'Youville College School of Nursing. Our Medical Team took on the huge responsibility of keeping everyone safe and healthy all week long, by monitoring potential COVID symptoms and ensuring our children with chronic illness are properly cared for. They worked together with our other volunteers to ensure that our kids can participate in as many activities as possible, despite their medical needs.

### **Leader-in-Training Program**

Our year-round Leader-in-Training Program was created in 2005 to address the needs of campers as they made the transition to young adulthood. Teens apply and are accepted into the program based on their written applications and evaluations from their past counselors and program staff at Camp AmeriKids. The LIT program is a two-year commitment designed for kids in their final years of high school and supports them in achieving their personal life goals. We facilitate both emotionally and educationally challenging activities, encourage teambuilding, offer new and unique experiences, and enable the LITs to form a supportive community of peers.

#### **Some notable LIT activities during the past year included:**



*Seven LIT participants spending Camp AmeriKids 2021 as Junior Counselors in the lower camp cabins.*

- **Junior Counselor Program:** After a year off in 2020, we were absolutely thrilled to welcome seven LIT participants as Junior Counselors (JC) at Camp AmeriKids in 2021. The JCs worked alongside our volunteers as cabin counselors and program staff, attended and taught activities, and were supportive role models to our campers. They motivated our campers to try new things and offered the best approach to working with our kids, since only a few years earlier, they were in the same position as the campers! This is the highlight of the LIT Program for many of our participants, and the application process can be quite competitive from year to year.
- **Post High School Planning Workshop:** For this event, we were joined on Zoom by two guest speakers, one from College Admissions at Niagara University LIT and another individual who works for an incredible CUNY program called ASAP – Accelerated Study in Associate Programs. This was an extremely productive workshop where our participants learned about



CUNY and SUNY college options, financial aid, and other post-high school graduation opportunities, included training programs. The LITs came with many questions and were provided with strategies on how to move forward after they graduate high school.

- **Resume Building Workshop:** This virtual session gave our participants the opportunity to learn best practices while developing their own resumes, as many of them begin applying for jobs and internships at this age. After a presentation, we broke off into small groups so that each LIT could work more closely with one of our volunteers to finalize their own resume.
- **COVID Information Session:** Our Medical Director attended a Zoom session with our LITs to provide more information on the COVID-19 Pandemic, address vaccine hesitancy, questions, and concerns. We had an excellent discussion in March 2021 where Dr. Haamid was able to debunk several myths and rumors regarding the vaccine.

All LIT events in 2021, other than the Junior Counselor Program, were held virtually using the Zoom Platform. We faced many challenges, especially ‘Zoom Fatigue’ among our participants. Many of our teens were still partaking in online school, so it was difficult to encourage them to attend more online programming on the weekends. We mixed up our workshops by playing games, offering prizes to those who had the best participation, and tried to use more creative techniques to encourage continued involvement. At the end of the summer, we had **12** teens graduate from the program, including 5 who attended Camp AmeriKids as Junior Counselors in 2021. Since it is a two-year program, we welcomed **10** LITs back in September and have accepted **20** new participants into the program this year!

Without question, the COVID-19 Pandemic has taken a toll on our organization. Despite this, we have had many accomplishments in 2021. Hosting in-person Camp AmeriKids was a major priority and our team feels extremely proud of that successful week. The ELM Project staff continues to work tirelessly to serve our population as best we can. In addition to our program activities, we implemented a new and improved camper database through a platform called Camp Brain, which streamlined the application process for camper families, hospital partners, and volunteers. We are also implementing a new donor base called Bloomerang this year which will significantly improve the administrative side of all fundraising efforts. Lastly, we welcomed a new Board Chair, Donald Rigoni, and two new Board Members, one of which is a former Camp AmeriKids camper, who will bring fresh insight to the governing of our organization. The support of the foundation has been vital in achieving our mission! The ELM Project has a strong community of supporters, and we are proud to be your partner each year. We look forward to continued growth and new opportunities in 2022!