

# Inner-city kids experience the outdoors at Camp Ernst

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Yishshiyah Yisrael, 9, of Covington, flies off a water slide at Camp Ernst YMCA in Boone County. He is among 25 children from the inner-city taking part in a program in which children work with academic mentors and participate in camp activities. / The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy

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Written by **Mark Hansel**  
mhansel@nky.com

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**BOONE COUNTY** - Horseback riding, fishing and swimming in a lake are all typical summertime activities for a lot of Northern Kentucky kids.

Many underprivileged children living in the inner-city, however, never get to experience those rites of summer.

The Housing Authority of Covington and YMCA Camp Ernst have joined together to enable 25 youngsters who live in public housing to get the chance this year.

"Probably every child who is here with us would not have an opportunity to participate in a summer camp like this if not for this program," Jon Adkins, education coordinator for the Housing Authority of Covington, said.

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The housing authority previously partnered with Camp Kern in Oregonia, Ohio for a summer camp program, but that affiliation ended in 2009. Adkins took the opportunity to revamp the curriculum before reaching out to the Camp Ernst YMCA to help restart the program this year.

"The biggest change is that we have added an education component," Adkins said. "The statistics show that urban children who don't have anything going on in the summer will fall further behind other kids their age, so with that knowledge we felt we had to do something."

The classroom work is only one hour each morning, with 30 minutes each devoted to reading literacy and math literacy.

"There was a little bit of resistance at first, but they really have taken it on because it's part of the structure and the routine," Adkins said.

The schoolwork is followed by a morning swim, lunch and recreational activities that are divided into three categories.

The ropes course features a zipline, a giant swing, a climbing wall and a rope bridge. The lake includes a 100-foot waterslide, banana boats and canoes and the valley offers swimming, archery and horseback riding.

Heather Scott, a counselor for the group, said the children also interact with campers from other groups, which allows them to work on social skills.

"We really try to get them to know the other kids and the other counselors," Scott said. "When they are doing the activities or the rotations they are placed in cabin with different kids so they get to know people outside their group. The biggest change we have seen is the way they have come to respect each other"

Mark Hardeman, 10, says he has made several new friends from outside of his group, including one who shares his love for basketball.

"I don't remember his name, but I just call him Nash because he reminds me of Steve Nash (of the NBA's Phoenix Suns)," Hardeman said. "He's cool."

The program is paid for through the housing authority's capitol fund and Adkins said he hopes it will become an annual activity.

"We're looking for grants to sustain the program and to grow the program," Adkins said. "Next year my goal is to expand it to 50 children because it's a program that truly changes the lives of these kids during the summertime."

Scott said she was surprised at how quickly the children took to activities, such as horseback riding, that they have never experienced before.

"Some of them were a little afraid of the bigger horses at first,"

Scott said. "But they didn't have any problem with the smaller horses and they picked it up pretty fast."

Scott, a fourth-grade teacher at Ruth Moyer Elementary School in Fort Thomas, attended Camp Ernst as a youth and also worked as a cabin counselor. She said the program has been a learning experience for her as well.

"They are different than the kids I usually work with, but they are good kids and it has been a lot of fun for me," she said.

Lisa Desatnik of the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati said the organization welcomed the opportunity to partner with the housing authority.

"Any time we have a chance to help kids in the areas we serve we want to do it and we think this is a great program," Desatnik said.

The seven-week camp concludes this week and for some of the kids that is much too soon.

"I don't want it to be over," Teana Stanley, who is 9 years old, said. "I want it to start again tomorrow "

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