

In My Memory *by Ila Florine Roose (Jan. 31, 1997)*

In 1967, as Corinne Jones was strolling along a beautiful white beach on the Intercoastal Canal at Johnson Beach, a thought came to her, what a nice place for a camp for Underprivileged children with its protected shallow waters. She had dreamed of one for a long time. God seemed to be telling her, "Go for it" and she did. Spending over a year soliciting money from friends and businessmen, she finally got the money to buy the land. She gave it to her church St. Cyprian's Episcopal. They gave it to the Episcopal Diocese of Florida and asked them to help start a camp. This was in 1961. Every time the bishop, The R. Rev. Hamilton West came to town, Corinne would ask him when he would help her build a camp. I was with her twice when that happened. In 1967 Bishop West gave us \$350.00 and asked The Rev. Arnold A. Bush, Rector of St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church in Gulf Breeze, to direct the camp. The first meeting was held at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church at 7:30 on a Sunday night. Thirty two people attended, eight were from Gulf Breeze Presbyterian Church whom Arnold asked to help. I attended with Corinne Jones as assistance director. I volunteered to be the craft teacher. It came time to name the camp. All put suggestions in the hat and were read aloud, but none were liked. There were several suggestions including sand and few happy words, so I suggested "Camp Happy Sands", and they all liked it. The camp name was approved. The county, along with a large group of people from churches, cleared the land. A group of men, headed by Mr. W. S. Waller from St. Cyprian's Church, built a pavilion with a tarpaulin roof along with new tables/benches. The next year they built a storage building and put a tin roof on. Camp started July 29th and went to August 2, 1968 for 60 children.

Father Bush directed camp for one year giving us a good start before moving to Jacksonville, FL. He asked a good friend who taught school at Catholic High and staff member at St. Johns Roman Catholic Church, The Rev. Father William E. Merritt (Father Bill), to direct camp. He continued for two years and brought several Catholic churches to help, some are still with us today. The young minister from Gulf Breeze Presbyterian Church, The Rev. Ray Ruark who had been helping since we started, directed camp for two years before he too moved to Jacksonville. These three young ministers started another camp like Happy Sands in Jacksonville. As we progressed into the fifth year we were blessed to have the Methodists come to help. Their youth director for their district, The Rev. Al Norris, directed camp for three years and provided a bus for us to use. I was still craft instructor and became treasurer, buying all the supplies. Corinne Jones went to camp with me every day; she was 70 years old and continued helping with

crafts. By then we had two sessions, eight days each, about 120 campers with all volunteer staff. After three years Father Al had to resign due to illness.

Nell Smith, a school teacher and counselor, co-directed the camp with me that year.

In 1976 we tried but failed to find a minister with enough spare time to direct the camp. I was then asked to direct Camp Happy Sands. "Can I do this?" I asked myself, I knew I could depend on my husband, my five children, their spouses, and my grandchildren. I had Ken Lea, chairman of our committee, and his wife Doris as Food Chairmen. They were from First Presbyterian Church whom had helped us since the beginning. We had Denbigh McGill from St. John's Episcopal Church as our Water Front Director where she served for eight years. Her children, Walter, Donald, and Francis, also served a number of years at the waterfront. I still wondered if I could do this. Thinking back over my past experiences that related to camp and people; ten years at the Pensacola City Recreation Department directing play grounds, youth centers, and kindergartens, ten years as a juvenile sheriff deputy working with low income citizens, and eight years as a Boy Scout den mother for my four sons, it then all came clear to me. God has prepared me and this is what he is asking me to do. How rewarding it has been for me and my family to do this work for God's "least of these". My husband Chuck took great care of the camp, the bus, and me when I was sick. My family helped each year cleaning up, repairing things broken, and making necessary improvements. Our son Charles Jr. has served as Chairman of the Committee after Ken Lea served twelve years. For a number of years the campers enjoyed Charles coming to camp with his guitar and teaching them songs. Grandchildren served as counselors like Chad Roose who served for three years and later three years as Water Front Director.

Remembering all our dependable sponsors like the women's groups of so many churches giving money, bringing food, and collecting towels and clothing, what a joy each have been. I have had the pleasure of meeting most of their organizations at their churches, showing slides of camp activities. What wonderful work they do in our community. My own church, St. Christopher's Episcopal, has always cooperated with us in most everything I have requested for the good of the camp. About the time I started directing the camp, our new Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast was formed with The Rt. Rev. George M. Murray elected as Bishop. In 1978, he instigated the camp land sale to The National Sea Shore with the provision that we could continue to operate the camp as long as we used it for low income children. He put the money from this sale into a trust fund for future use to support the camp. It has been used to buy a used bus, make camp repairs due to severe damage from Hurricane Fredrick, and surface a new entrance road. We use the interest earned and add to our budget when sponsor donations do not meet annual cost.

The National Sea Shore has been an excellent host protecting the camp from any public abuse, and providing safety and security. They often provide talks with “show and tell” to the children about the wildlife and the National Seashore.

Bishop Murray awarded Corinne Jones and me The Episcopal Diocese Distinguished Service Award and a gold necklace medallion.

The Episcopal Diocese, with The Rt. Rev. Charles F. Duvall and his most efficient Administrator Vincent Currie Jr., continue to give us dependable support. Bishop Duvall visits the camp and tells the campers wonderful modern versions of bible stories.

I remember hundreds of wonderful people who have helped make this project successful, but impossible to list them all. A few must be mentioned, especially those that made my job easier; Jan Smith served as camp nurse for many years and has been our Food Chairman since 1988, Fran Cassidy served as nurse every day for ten years, and Martha Wilhoit served as nurse in earlier years and after retirement came back serving every Monday. Other outstanding counselors are: Ruth White twelve years, Christ Grier eight years, Jeff Underwood six years, and Mary Brooks six years. The Rev. Robin Myers told bible stories and put on plays when Associate Rector at St. Christopher's Episcopal. He was responsible for having the pavilion floor concreted.

Camp Programs: The year I started directing camp some changes were made. We operated five summer sessions, five days each week. Two years later we added the sixth week, our final goal. Limiting 30 children a week, we made an effort to bring in sickle cell anemia children with the assistance of the Escambia County Sickle Cell Foundation. Chenessa Sunday, of the 4H Club, taught programs four days a week. We agreed to allow the Community Drug & Alcohol Commission to give their camp program four days a week. I developed a training booklet for counselors, with one third about nature. In 1994, I compiled another booklet about the wild creatures at camp that fly, swim, walk, or crawl.

The Audubon Society has sent us good nature instructors: Gail Childa for three years, Owen Fang three years, Ruth Mead two years, and now serving Carol Asherfield. For the week of hearing impaired children, Ellen Lea helped me start this worthy program seven years ago. She serves as an interpreter with others helping like Necole Merritt a teacher of the hearing impaired with help through the school.

Boy Scout Projects: In order to receive their Eagle Scout Awards, three scouts built very useful things that were needed. Jason Edwards built a large table with benches and a small pavilion, Ben Pierman built a boardwalk from the main pavilion to the waterfront, and Chip Lea built a very useful lifeguard platform with roof and benches. His scout friends also helped clean up after Hurricane Opal.

Many groups have helped repair and improve the camp such as St. Francis Episcopal men who put a new metal roof on the main pavilion, St. Christopher's group made a new entrance road and parking lot, The Order of St. Andrews from St. Christopher's, with the Roose brothers, reroofed and repaired the storage building, mounted the wood boardwalk, and cleaned up debris after Hurricane Opal.

A most beautiful memory I have, while camp was in session, is of a little boy who ran very fast from the waterfront to the pavilion to show me a hermit crab he had found. I hope, with God's help, that I may continue a few more years and add more special memories like this for us all.

Corinne Jones retired from the camp in 1984 and died in 1994. She dedicated her life to children of Pensacola. What a wonderful Christian and friend.

Tentative Plans for the coming season: It would be great to spend extra money received this season to buy better crafts for the campers to make, to give each child a nicer present on Friday when they leave, and more useful things for them to play with at camp and the waterfront.

Transportation is still a problem, costs to keep an old bus running is such waste. If any sponsor knows of a bus that can be borrowed or rented, or large vans, please let us know.

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