



# WHERE THE **WILD** **CAMPERS** ARE

At a 4-H camp in Rockingham County, children from all walks of life learn how to live together on the land, build teamwork skills, take on leadership roles, and forge lifelong friendships.

*written by JERI ROWE / photography by JERRY WOLFORD & SCOTT MUTERSBAUGH*



It takes concentration to master the art of archery, as 9-year-old Ivy Hannah learned while camping at the Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H Educational Center in Reidsville. In between activities, 12-year-old Zylah Auguste (opposite) took a break to relax and twirl around in a tree swing.

**N**EAR THE SWINGING bridge over Carroll Creek, with water lapping at their ankles, they start their hunt. They're all first-time summer campers, 8 to 10 years old. With a college-student counselor nicknamed Tae beside them, they step into the creek and bend at the waist, nets in their hands, eyes inches from the water. The kids are in full search mode. And with each discovery, their curiosity takes off.

"Tae, Tae, Tae!" yells one camper. "I found a shell!"

"I see a frog!" says another. "Look! There he is!"

"Guys, guys, guys!" shouts a third. "I'm finding clams! Dig in the dirt! Dig in the dirt!"

"Wow, look at this cool rock!" exclaims a fourth. "This thing looks like a school bus!"

At least a dozen campers see Carroll Creek as their own gold mine.



Campers like 9-year-old Zeneyah Baldwin. She's from Hillsborough, and everyone calls her Zoe'. She's digging in the creek bed, looking for clams. She's hunched over, so close to the surface of the water that when she rises up, the tips of her long braids are soaked.

"I needed to see into the creek so I could put stuff into the buckets," Zoe' explains later, over a lunch of chicken tenders, tater tots, and sweet tea. "When I dug into the bank, I found worms! *Worms!*"

But your soaked braids?

"Oh, yeah," she replies. "I'll wash them out in the shower."

So begins another day at the Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H Educational Center.

**ONE OF THREE NC STATE EXTENSION 4-H CAMPS,** Betsy-Jeff Penn covers 220 acres. It includes eight cabins, a rec hall, a dining hall, a swimming pool, and a 22-acre lake. The facility sits less than a mile down Cedar Lane, just northwest of Reidsville.

**Zoe' Baldwin (above)** got her feet wet during her first stay at BJP, while 8-year-old Owen Baillon (below) tested out the new swinging bridge, erected in 2018 after Hurricane Michael destroyed the original.



Campers are taught good communication skills while canoeing on Lake Hazel. In the green boat, 12-year-olds Serenity Davis (foreground) and Jalisa Bennett keep a close connection with BJP staffers Erika Quintero (foreground) and Dre Richardson.

At least 1,000 campers between ages 6 and 17 come every summer to this sylvan setting, which is owned and operated by North Carolina State University.

Everyone who comes — campers, counselors, staff, alumni — know it by another name: BJP. For them, BJP is a magical place of inner discovery. Relationships flourish, leaders blossom, teamwork becomes instinctual, and individual responsibility takes hold as Mother Nature becomes a teacher and a guide.

Since BJP opened in 1964, campers and counselors have seen the center as a second home. And every summer, they are everywhere. On the lake in canoes. At the archery range, with bows in hand. In Carroll Creek, dipping nets into the water.

Or inside the dining hall, staring at rows of old summer staff photos dating back to 1980. Campers stand there and pick out who — and what — they remember.

Stacy Burns remembers much. She's a former sixth-grade teacher from Connecticut who came to BJP in 2007. She changed careers and began work as an environmental educator. She's now the center's director, a job she's held since 2015. Burns knows through her studies how BJP came to be, and she

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shares its story with the campers. She tells them about Margaret Beatrice “Betsy” Schoellkopf Penn, a woman who was way ahead of her time.

Betsy Penn was a philanthropic trailblazer who rubbed shoulders with men and women who helped shape early-20th century America. One was her husband, Thomas Jefferson “Jeff” Penn, a farmer and investment banker. The Penns traveled the world and lived on a 1,000-acre estate called Chinqua-Penn Plantation in Rockingham County. They built a sprawling manor house and filled it with treasures that they discovered during their adventures. They raised cattle, grew tobacco, contributed to local charities, and provided jobs.

After Jeff died in 1946, Betsy focused even more on ways that she could help North Carolina. She built the Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H Educational Center in



As a camper, Taqee Richardson (above) learned the value of shared knowledge. He's now a lead counselor at BJP, passing along the founding philosophy of Betsy Penn (below), who, in 1963, was honored for launching the 4-H educational facility.

honor of her late husband; the facility was formally dedicated in 1964. A year later, Betsy died at 83. Yet her indefatigable spirit runs deep through BJP.

Burns makes sure of it.

Every summer, she takes campers to the stone dam below Chinqua-Penn. It's an easy walk from camp, situated inside a cluster of tall oaks just beyond the ropes course. At the dam, a place of quarried rock that Jeff built for Betsy as an anniversary present, Burns tells the campers about the generosity of the woman she calls "Miss Betsy."

"This is what Miss Betsy chose to do," Burns says to the kids. "She created this beautiful place for children like you, so you can come here forever to understand nature and understand yourselves. It's a gift that she has given to every one of you."

**THAT INCLUDES ANGELA BRISSON AND TAGQEE Richardson.** BJP is in their DNA. Each came to the center for the first time when they were 8. Brisson came because of her Extension 4-H agent in Franklin County. Richardson came because of his mom, Marcia, a nurse in Fuquay-Varina. Marcia had come to BJP herself when she was a youngster, and she wanted her son to have the same experience.

**"I found this quote: 'A candle loses nothing in lighting another candle.' That resonates with me."**

At first, Richardson wasn't a model camper. After a few run-ins with leadership, he was sent to the camp's stable to shovel horse manure and reflect on how he'd been acting and how to improve. Slowly, BJP grew on him. He grew, too. Today, Richardson is 25 and works seasonally at the center. Campers call him "Sweet T."

As lead counselor, Richardson oversees 30 other counselors. He also runs the snack bar, DJs the dance in the recreation center, and takes groups of campers into the woods to encourage them to respect nature and understand ecology.

And to play in the dirt.

He also talks to the campers, particularly those who come on scholarship. Nearly a third of them do, and they come from underserved neighborhoods across North Carolina. In every conversation, Richardson wants to hear their stories. Then, he tells them his.

"I found this quote not so long ago that talks about not being selfish with your knowledge," Richardson says. "It said, 'A candle loses nothing in lighting another candle.' That resonates with me."

What resonates with Brisson is the turn on Cedar Lane that brings every camper, every counselor, and every staff member to BJP. For her, that's how it all began.

Brisson started as a camper, became a program staff member, and met her husband, Adam Carson,



**“I like being part of something that has a legacy. Now, I’m leaving my own footprint.”**

a fellow program staffer, at BJP. In October 2009, as the center’s trees changed from green to gold, they got married beside the lake.

In 2011, Brisson moved to Washington, D.C., and worked with one of the world’s leading environmental nonprofits, The Nature Conservancy. Seven years later, she came back home to help run the North Carolina 4-H camping program. Her job takes her across the state — and back to where it all started, near that turn on Cedar Lane. At BJP.

“It gets in your soul, and part of that, honestly, is the energy and love that Betsy Penn created in the 1960s,” Brisson says. “Everyone who comes to camp feels that. When the kids come, all they have to worry about is not burning their marshmallow or getting to the pool on time. They learn to relax in a place where people care about them.

“They’re not learning  $2 + 2 = 4$ ,” she continues. “They’re learning how to be a good friend, how to clean up after themselves — just all these life skills

in an environment that pushes them beyond their comfort zones. There’s something really special about that.” Brisson, now 37, knows that firsthand. And so do many others.

**LIKE ELI KICKLIGHTER. HE’S 13, FROM KENLY. HE’S** come to BJP for the past three summers. He talks not about what he’s done but about the confidence that he feels. “It helps me do life,” he says of camp.

And Alijah Alexander. He’s 9, from Siler City. He’s in his first year at BJP. He worried that camp would be like school. He was way wrong. For the first time in his life, he picked up a bow and shot an arrow. “I almost hit the bull’s-eye!” he says.

And Erin Tyler. She’s 21, lives in bandanas and friendship bracelets, and sleeps in a hammock underneath a ceiling of stars. Some campers call her “Miss Frizzle.” She’s come to BJP since she was 8. For the past two summers, as a counselor, she’s helped young teens learn how to live in the woods.

This month, Tyler will graduate with a nursing degree from Queens University of Charlotte. She wants to specialize in pediatric nursing because, thanks to BJP, she’s discovered an affinity for helping children. Ask her why she’s kept coming back to BJP for the past 13 years, and she points to the wall of photos. “I like being part of something that



**Program staffer Angela Brisson (above)** has spent much of her adult life at BJP, learning to be “a positive role model and an empathetic adult,” she says. **As an adventure counselor, Erin Tyler (below)** leads the more advanced teen campers on survival trips in the woods for a few days at a time.



Last summer, 11-year-old Cheyenne Reagan jumped feet-first into activities at BJP along with 16 fellow campers from Orange County. This summer, she's returning with 25 — the largest number of Orange County campers in years, according to Jonathon Smith, the county's interim Extension director.



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has a legacy," she says. "Now, I'm leaving my own footprint."

As for Burns, the center's director; she has so many memories that she sees as special. Like the time when four young teenage boys, standing shoulder to shoulder in the recreation hall, were holding ... something? "When I moved closer, I saw they were working together to save an injured dragonfly," she says. "No one told them to. They just did it."

And the lesson? It always goes back to Miss Betsy. She believed in that well-known verse from that well-known book that sits in every church pew: *To whom much is given, much will be required.*

Betsy Penn saw a need to lift up the sons and daughters of North Carolina. She paid for kids to go to college, helped struggling families pay their bills, and donated the 220 acres just south of Chinqua-Penn Plantation so that children could canoe, climb, and gallop through the woods for generations to come.

They will be back again this summer. And Burns will be there, too. She'll tell stories about "Miss Betsy" and help campers experience new things as they shout loud and proud about their discoveries. Like Zoe', the worm-catcher of Carroll Creek. And then Burns will sit back and watch. She knows what will come. It happens every summer: More memories and more reminders of why this place just beyond that turn on Cedar Lane is so special to so many, not just her.

That is, BJP.

"It speaks to our sense of belonging, our sense of community," Burns says. "It reminds us that we're all connected." *Os*

*Jeri Rowe is the senior writer at High Point University.*

**Registration links for summer camp are now available on the websites for Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H Educational Center in Reidsville, Millstone 4-H Camp in Ellerbe, and Eastern 4-H Center in Columbia. To learn more, visit their respective URLs: [bjpenn4h.org](http://bjpenn4h.org), [millstone4hcamp.com](http://millstone4hcamp.com), [eastern4hcenter.org](http://eastern4hcenter.org).**



## NC 4-H COMES OF AGE

From early farm clubs to today's virtual learning classes, 4-H has been helping North Carolina kids value their hearts, heads, hands, and health for more than 100 years.

**1909** North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now NC State) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture launch the first corn clubs for farm youth, which later become 4-H clubs.

**1911** The iconic four-leaf clover logo, now inextricably linked with 4-H, is created.

**1919** The first county 4-H camp is established in Warren County.

**1929** The first state camp opens in Swannanoa; all boys and girls clubs formally become 4-H clubs.

**1936** R.E. Jones is hired as the first Black 4-H leader in North Carolina; 4-H club membership among Black children reaches 10,000.

**1939** 4-H programs are present in all 100 North Carolina counties.

**1942** As part of 4-H's stateside support during World War II, North Carolina 4-H helps fund and name two U.S. warships.

**1942** The first 4-H Electric Congress is held to promote the electrification of rural North Carolina.

**1950** North Carolina leads all states in 4-H membership.

**1956** The first state 4-H camp for Black youth, Camp J.W. Mitchell, opens in Onslow County.

**1960s** 4-H expands to include urban youth, reflecting the state's declining rural population.

**1962** 4-H evolves from school clubs to community clubs, creating 2,800 new 4-H clubs statewide.

**1965** 4-H clubs officially desegregate at the state level.

**1990** North Carolina 4-H youth participation exceeds 200,000.

**2014** 4-H and Family & Consumer Sciences programs become official units within NC State Extension.

**2015** 4-H expands its mission focus to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), healthy living, and good citizenship.

**2015** Groundbreaking takes place for the State Employees' Credit Union 4-H Learning Center and Cole Foundation Auditorium at Millstone 4-H Camp in Ellerbe.

**2017** NC 4-H Electric Congress celebrates its 75th anniversary at a weeklong event in Charlotte.

**2020** Duke Energy funds a teaching trail along Millstone Creek.

**2020-2021** 4-H launches virtual learning classes to engage thousands of youth during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Four 4-H members raise the American flag and the 4-H flag at the Betsy-Jeff Penn 4-H Educational Center, circa 1967.