



STAFF PHOTO BY JIM REIDEN

Walk this way: Counselor Amy Worden, 18, of Rochester Hills strolls with Ben Purcell, 8, Rochester Hills and Blondell Tachoor, 10, and Sherman Grant, 12, both of Detroit.

Camp tackles metro Detroit's quality of life

BY TIM CARVELL
STAFF WRITER

At first, it looks like any other summer camp.

The campers have a circle gathering in the morning, boys wor-

ry about catching cooties from girls, and everybody wants to see the dead frog.

Fairly typical.

But while most summer camps aim to teach kids how to bend moco-

casins or paddle canoes, the Mark Leshner 21st Century City/Suburban Camp has larger goals in mind.

"We'd like to make the quality of life better for everybody in metro Detroit," said camp founder Shel Leshner of West Bloomfield.

To achieve that goal, the camp brought children from various ethnic and economic backgrounds to live with one another on the Oakland University campus in Rochester last week.

The core of the camp's program is the Green Circle, in which the entire camp engages in an open discussion of difference. The discussion can have some surprising results, as when counselor Kurt Schultz asked the campers to list the necessities of life.

One boy answered "a wife to do the housework."

Oops.

Later, a girl answered that God is necessary to life, which prompted another child to note that not everybody believes in God.

In each instance, Schultz used the children's statements as a springboard for a discussion of difference. Their conclusions: housework is not women's work, and the importance of faith varies from person to person.

Through the Green Circle and other activities, it soon became clear that prejudice is not an abstract concept to these children; many have been excluded for one reason or another.

"After the Rodney King verdict, a lot of people were acting really prej-

udiced," said Sharonda Jackson of Birmingham. "I know a lot of people in my school were. They wouldn't let you play with them."

To counteract these experiences, the camp deliberately mixed children and counselors from different backgrounds. For some kids, the camp was their first up-close and personal encounter with someone from a different ethnic group.

"It's like a different world," said Sherla Felton of Detroit.

The learning experience afforded by simple contact with other children should not be underestimated, according to camp counselor Veronica Nichols.

"What I like is, when they group up, it's across gender, across race," she said. "When you get them at this age, you can teach them that other people don't have tails or eat babies. When they grow up, they'll be faced with racism, and they'll remember camp and say 'That's not true.'"

One of the beliefs upon which the camp was founded is that children are eminently impressionable.

"At an early age, you'd be surprised at the things that touch them," said camp director Curtis Davenport.

To ensure that the students' experience stays with them, Leshner and Davenport are already planning continuing education activities and camp reunions every three months; already, the Detroit Drive has donated tickets for the first reunion.

In addition to creating greater harmony in the Detroit area,



Inside the circle: Camp counselor Kurt Schultz, 26, of Auburn Hills asks for the campers' help in deciding who should be accepted into the Green Circle of "caring, sharing and respect."

Leshner had another goal in mind when he created the camp: remembering his son, Mark.

By Leshner's accounts, Mark was an outgoing, energetic child who could make friends with anybody. Following Mark's crib death at 21 months last May, Leshner and his wife Mary decided to work through their grief by creating a camp in his memory.

"I'm quite happy," Leshner said. "There's a few times I have to step aside and fight tears. I wish I could see him here physically, but I feel him here. His spirit is here."

In creating the camp, Leshner decided to extend Mark's spirit of un-

derstanding to the communities of Detroit, an area which Leshner said is in dire need of cooperation.

"It's not like the problems stop at one road," he said. "We've got to work together. There's too many problems that affect everybody, and we've got to work together to solve those."

If the campers' reactions are any indication, Leshner's ideal of building trust and friendships is becoming a reality.

"We're learning how you could relate to each other, to people who are different from you," said Thomas Cuthbert of Mount Clemens.

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