



Curriculum In Focus

2021

For 90 years, the Louis August Jonas Foundation has been committed to helping young people grow intellectually, ethically, and globally through Camp Rising Sun, our full-scholarship, summer leadership program for teenagers from around the world. This series of articles takes a deeper look at the Camp Rising Sun curriculum, which has inspired in so many young people worldwide, a commitment to compassionate and responsible leadership for the betterment of their communities and the world.



The Louis
August Jonas
Foundation

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1. Curriculum in Focus:

An educational framework designed for success

In this chapter we will focus on our educational framework, which is based on fostering independent learning and on emotional intelligence for compassionate leadership

The CRS program is meant to serve as a watershed in the development of an individual's identity. Its success lies in encouraging in each participant the fullest realization of their intellectual, cultural, humanistic and ethical capabilities. Through hands-on social emotional learning experiences, participants develop new self-awareness, increased self-confidence, and enhanced perceptions and understanding of the world around them. In some cases, participants do not feel the full impact of the program until years or even decades after their summer at CRS.

The CRS curriculum is thoughtfully designed and implemented to support the four core program goals, which seek to:

1. Foster an appreciation of both diversity and common humanity of the participants and encourage lasting friendships across boundaries of color, religion, gender and nationality.
2. Expand the participant's intellectual horizons through serious discussion of personal and world issues and by encouraging introspection; to heighten artistic sensibilities through guided exploration.
3. Develop leadership abilities and self-reliance by encouraging each participant to take on significant projects and responsibilities for the program and to gain experience in motivating others.
4. Offer and demonstrate by action a strong working philosophy of giving characterized by the belief that personal fulfillment flows from making lifelong commitments to serving society through the pursuit of humanitarian goals.

Our founder, George "Freddie" Jonas, strongly believed that "one cannot help but feel it is more important to teach someone how to think or approach a problem than to give the answers. There are so many problem

areas in this ever-changing world that the answers of today may not fit the questions of tomorrow."



In the spirit of this philosophy, the CRS program is rooted in an educational framework of experiential and social-emotional learning, which equips participants with lifelong leadership skills that are adaptive to cultural and societal changes.

Our Approach: Independence within Structure

Through our unique experiential learning model, participants are given considerable independence within the program structure to construct knowledge through meaningful hands-on experiences. At CRS, students are valued as intelligent, responsible, independent thinkers, each with unique lived cultural experiences. As such, significant value is placed on participants' active voices and contributions, which serve as lessons in responsibility and foster a sense of ownership over the learning process.

While there is considerable freedom for the participants of the summer to shape their experience, there is a strong framework in place to provide the structure within which campers may safely explore new ideas, challenges and experiences. In its most basic form, experiential learning involves a recursive cycle of action and reflection based on a personal experience.

[According to the Association for Experiential](#)

[Learning](#), “experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people’s capacity to contribute to their communities.”

Our summer counselors use a facilitative style of coaching and feedback to foster and model the reflective process and create a supportive space for



young people to challenge themselves to take risks and learn through mistakes. Participants then use that feedback to experiment with new roles and behaviors that are informed by prior experiences.

Emotional Intelligence for Compassionate Leadership

In order to better support the development of responsible world leaders, our summer counselors are also trained in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) theory, which is a process that develops emotional and relational competencies in the following areas [as described](#) by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

1. Self-Awareness: ability to identify one’s strengths and weaknesses
2. Self-Management: self-control, stress management, and ability to motivate the self to achieve personal goals
3. Social Awareness: ability to understand that others come from diverse backgrounds and

4. Relationship Skills: ability to effectively communicate and listen to others
5. Responsible Decision-Making: ability to make decisions that are based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms

The [CRS program builds these competencies](#) through a variety of experiences that can contribute to the development of a compassionate leadership style. Campers are given the opportunity to experience and interact with people, cultures and ideas that are entirely new to them, expanding their social and global awareness and building their understanding of both themselves and the world. They are given the space and the time to reflect on their own place and potential within their newly-formed community and to consider how their actions affect the experience of others. They are challenged to extend this thinking to the effect their actions can have in their home communities and in the world.

[As alumna Nadine ‘16 says](#), “Seeing that I could choose to do things that could make the little world of Camp different made me realize that I was nearing adulthood and could change how things operated in the real world.”

Be it through working on a collaborative group project, attending a peer-led instruction, or developing cultural awareness through an evening discussion, CRS provides carefully planned opportunities for leadership experience; arranges for thoughtful, responsive staff to act as mentors; and designs a pace of delivery that allows time for critical reflection on experiences — time that is often missing from our lives. In the upcoming chapters, we will share more about how the CRS educational framework is implemented throughout our curriculum in support of [our mission](#).

In this chapter, we will explore the pivotal role of staff

2. Curriculum in Focus:

How Adult and Peer Mentors Facilitate the Learning Process

and youth mentors in facilitating the experiential learning process for first year participants.

At Camp Rising Sun, our summer counselors are acutely aware that one positive role model can have a lifelong impact on the trajectory of a young person's life. As such, our staff take great responsibility in shaping the experiential growth process for program participants. While much of the actual program experience happens through interactions among participants themselves, summer staff act as catalysts in the learning process by creating the structure



through which participants process and make meaning from their lived experiences.

Our counselors undergo an intensive 10-day [professional training program](#) to develop the critical skills needed to implement the curriculum and pedagogy. During the training process, staff members develop the skills to provide constructive feedback and guide participants through thoughtful questioning and in order to reach their best thinking and decision-making as they take on leadership responsibilities.

Rather than being front and center in the daily program, our staff are trained to lead from behind the scenes and encourage participants to take agency of their experience and become their own teachers and leaders. Feedback is thus framed not solely on

praise or faults, but as a way to guide campers to reflect on their choices and consider adjustments based on lessons learned.

The Role of Staff in Leadership Development

One of the most prominent ways that counselors guide youth leaders through the experiential learning process of reflection and action is through the role of Counselor of the Day. Each day at Camp Rising Sun, a counselor is assigned to mentor a pair of young people who assume leadership of the Camp program for an entire day. Counselors meet with their youth leaders before, during, and after the leadership experience in order to provide mentorship throughout the entirety of the planning, execution, and reflection process.

Counselors provide direct coaching in individual settings then step back to allow youth to lead in front of peers while providing ongoing support and encouragement throughout the day. The Counselor



of the Day encourages youth leaders to consider a variety of topics such as:

- Reflection on personal leadership styles
- Opportunities for collaborative leadership
- Cultural differences in leadership styles
- Interpersonal and intercultural communication skills
- Equitable distribution of responsibilities

among leader pairs

Through the mentorship process, youth leaders develop strong [emotional intelligence skills](#) such as self-awareness, stress management, intercultural communication, and responsible decision-making.

1. Counselors understand that the relationships they develop with campers give them a better understanding of how they relate to the program and how the goals of the program might relate to their lives at home. Young people appreciate that counselors create a space to express doubts in a nonjudgmental relationship and to share concerns and problems. They want staff members to listen to their goals and aspirations and serve as an active listening partner to help them figure things out.

The Unique Role of Peer Mentors

In addition to quality 1:1 mentorship from trained counselors, CRS participants also benefit from the guidance of peers who can better relate to what they are going through in adolescence. Each year, we welcome back a handful of individuals from the previous season as second year campers (2YCs). Together with staff, 2YCs set the tone, introduce traditions, and model positive leadership during the early days of a season.

While 2YCs remain campers, they have distinct leadership responsibilities and are looked to as role models from the first days of camp. 2YCs also arrive early to receive training from staff members to prepare them for their new role as mentors.

CRS alumna, Nataelle ('16, '17), reflected on her new leadership role prior to her second season in 2017, saying, "As a second year, I believe that my focus will be geared towards being a supportive sister within our camp community and being willing to help others in ways that can make all of our camp experiences the best that they can be."

On the first day of the program, new participants are greeted in New York City by 2YCs who model the leadership structure for the season and provide

emotional support as campers transition into the new environment. It is important for first year participants to see peers of their own age, rather than adult counselors, leading the program in the first week because it builds confidence and motivates them to take ownership of their summer experience.

According to Nataelle, "the responsibility of a second year is to help first years to adjust to camp life while allowing them to create their own camp experience no matter how different it may be than my own." Because of this, it is central to the leadership of 2YCs to model productive and thoughtful behavior in alignment with the program values and to also be aware of how and when to step back in different situations, making it possible for first years to gain valuable leadership experiences and shape the trajectory of the season.

Beyond the first week of the program, 2YCs continue to mirror many of the same mentorship skills found in counselors. They are continuously looked to for advice and support. Based on their experience with CRS, 2YCs provide support by:

- Checking in with youth leaders on logistical questions about planning the week
- Answering questions related to peers' social adjustment to the international camp setting
- Passing down traditions from past seasons

Because of their unique duality as participants and mentors, 2YCs collaborate closely with counselors to identify the unique needs of their peers and play a critical role in the development of a cohesive group identity.

The CRS curriculum creates a supportive structure that allows young people to challenge themselves and practice problem solving and decision-making within the security of adult guidance and peer support. In the upcoming chapters, we will continue to share more about how the CRS educational framework is implemented throughout our curriculum in support of [our mission](#).

3. Curriculum in Focus:

Intentional Leadership Roles for Lifelong Learning

In this chapter, we will explore our unique leadership model, which provides formative learning experiences for first-year participants.

Each day of the summer program provides countless opportunities intentionally designed for leadership development. Some responsibilities are connected to defined roles that are assigned to participants while others emerge naturally in the formation of a collective community. Giving youth the opportunity to be leaders of a day, project or experience has been central to the educational experience offered at Camp Rising Sun since its first season in 1930.

Various leadership experiences may include taking on roles such as coordinating daily activities, facilitating small group discussions, managing construction projects, organizing a drama production, or planning an off-site camping trip. Through these experiences and others, participants are able to:

- Practice complex reasoning and critical thinking skills
- Sensitively make inclusive and thoughtful decisions based on the well-being of the group
- Adapt to unforeseen challenges and construct solution-oriented reactions
- Communicate and collaborate with individuals of different backgrounds to achieve goals
- Model mature behavior and gain experience in motivating peers
- Develop self-reliance and confidence in their abilities

One of the most prominent and long-standing leadership roles associated with the Rising Sun program is the selection of rotating weekly young leaders who are collectively responsible for coordinating programming and logistics for the entire camp. These rotating daily leader pairs are [supported by a team of staff members](#) who coach and facilitate sound decisions. Placing trust in youth participants inspires a greater sense of ownership and collective

responsibility over the summer experience.

The value of collective responsibility is best captured in the concept of *servant leadership*, which prioritizes the development of ethical leaders who make decisions based on the needs of the broader community over personal interests. This idea of leadership as a service to others is the bedrock of our leadership experiences at CRS. By evaluating the shifting needs of a community of peers, young leaders learn to adapt their leadership styles to different problems and discover when to shift between [followership](#) and leadership as needed in the facilitation of the group experience.

Learning to Lead by Overcoming Risks

In the process of learning to lead in the service of others, students are often challenged to make difficult, yet necessary decisions, at the risk of disapproval from peers. Daily, leaders will be faced with many situations that require the ability to think through the implications of decisions and develop creative strategies to resolve complex problems.

For example, leaders of the day are frequently faced with logistical questions about scheduling changes, such as:

- If [teamworks](#) run late, how will this impact afternoon [instructions](#)?
- If the swimming instruction is rained out, where will we find time to reschedule?
- Who will be impacted if dinner is served before the soccer tournament ends?

Students are also encouraged to think about the implications of their actions and whether any individuals may be marginalized by their decisions. It is through experiences like these that students:

- Practice sound reasoning
- Consider how their actions impact other individuals and groups
- Adapt to unexpected changes, and
- Develop confidence in their abilities to lead large projects.

Serving as leaders in the Camp community also provides an opportunity for adolescents to plan, risk, fail, reflect, and try again in a safe and supportive environment. Through trial and error, participants work to overcome the fear of failure and persevere through difficult situations.

This lesson was particularly meaningful for Theodore, a 2018 alumnus from New York. According to Theodore, "I've learned that given the position of leadership, it's okay to feel a little nervous, a little shy, even a little scared, but you should never let it keep you from activating. Instead, use those feelings as energy, step into the ring of leadership and take your best shot at it."

For Haadia, a 2018 participant from Pakistan, the seemingly simple task of starting a fire shed the most light on the valuable leadership lesson of perseverance through trial and error. [Haadia reflected on her experiences at Camp Rising Sun](#), sharing, "My first attempt at building a fire burnt my fingers. As I dipped my stinging fingers into my bucket of water to ease the pain, a blaze of determination kindled in me, fueling my determination to get through the night. I needed to be strong. When that first log caught fire, the blaze felt like an inferno." The new experiences of Camp Rising Sun taught Haadia how to take appropriate risks and try new things.

Leadership for Lifelong Learning

For Haadia, Theodore, and countless alumni, the leadership lessons gained at Camp Rising Sun extend well beyond the summer program. Being able to process and learn from daily experiences are valuable skills for lifelong leadership. The lessons Haadia learned at CRS became a way of thought and action that inspired her to start her own business and develop a summer camp in her home community for children who are blind.

Jadon, a 2018 participant from Barbados, also attributes his Rising Sun experience to his improved organizational skills, mature and independent decision-making, and focus on setting lifelong leadership goals. While taking on leadership roles,

students learn how to take and give instructions, work with groups, fulfill responsibilities, and develop organizational skills.

[Jadon says](#), "Thanks to Camp, my confidence has greatly increased which has helped me with each task. Since Camp, I have become more willing to take on leadership roles. I hope to further develop my leadership skills by continually growing as I know I am going to be faced with more responsibilities."

Camp Rising Sun's emphasis on independence within structure through experiential and social-emotional learning prepares participants for a lifetime of leadership development and personal growth.



4. Curriculum in Focus:

Expanding horizons through instructional programs

In this chapter, we will explain how our instructional programs expand intellectual and artistic horizons while providing practical experience in giving and receiving



feedback.

The daily instructions are posted on the bulletin board. Which session will you choose to attend?

- Lyrical Structure
- Road Tennis
- Topology
- Language of Wakanda
- Playwriting
- Trial Law
- Intersectional Feminism
- History of Folk Music & Activism
- Bioethics
- Chinese Calligraphy
- Manipulation in Media
- Global Police Reform
- Sustainable Development
- Intro to Guitar

Each day at Camp Rising Sun, youth are presented with a selection of instructions like those listed above and can sign up to attend an organized activity of their choice. Instructions offer participants an opportunity to learn a new skill or develop new knowledge on a variety of interesting topics.

Instructions are typically 90-minutes in length and can be led by campers or counselors. On occasion, guest speakers and alumni visit the campus to give expert lectures or keynote presentations. As the season progresses, more and more sessions are facilitated by campers with staff members providing support and feedback as active session participants.

Campers are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and try new activities that they would not typically participate in, or have access to, at home. The success of an instruction is not based on the quality of the final product, but on the engagement of participants in the learning process.

Campers and staff members can propose an instruction on any topic of interest that they would like to share with others. Dedicated counselors work with campers to refine their ideas and create an activity plan that accommodates different learning styles and aligns with one of the [four program goals](#). Counselors follow up with presenters afterwards to provide feedback on how things went.

In the spirit of adult mentorship and coaching, counselors also encourage campers to give instructions as a way to engage individuals more fully in the program. For example, a counselor might encourage a camper who is homesick to share an instruction about their favorite hobbies from home. Alternatively, a counselor might encourage a Spanish-speaking camper who struggles speaking comfortably in English to partner with other Spanish-speaking campers to teach an instruction on the Spanish language and its various dialects.

Allowing campers to create sessions based on their personal interests and background knowledge promotes camper ownership of the program while affirming the diverse identities and cultural

knowledge that individuals bring to the program based on their unique lived experiences.



Facilitating an instruction provides campers with direct experience in public speaking, time management, and group facilitation. Our staff also foster an environment where participants who have experienced teaching an instruction can continue their learning by serving as a sounding board to their peers as they plan their own.

Challenging Perspectives and Inspiring Action

While instructions provide opportunities to explore intellectual and artistic topics in small group settings, evening programs unite the community in dedicated exploration of one or more of the four program goals in a large-group setting.

Dedicated staff members work with campers and counselors to develop in-depth programs that are interesting, thought-provoking and engaging to a variety of learning styles. Whereas the topics of instructions change daily, there are some evening programs that are consistent from week to week.

Each week includes at least one of the following evening programs:

- Weekly artistic production - a variety show highlighting the unique artistic talents of camp community members

- Hot topic discussion - provides critical perspectives and discourse on global or regional issues on current or historical events, such as: independence movements, disability discrimination, racism and white supremacy, global hunger, or refugee crises
- Weekly campfire - an all-group activity to build community and inspire critical reflection on the lessons of the program
- Camper-led evening program - topic selected and designed by youth leaders of the week
- Staff-led evening program - topic selected and designed by counselors

Instructions and evening programs are both designed to expand intellectual horizons and heighten artistic sensibilities among campers. Evening programs particularly challenge campers to engage in higher-level thinking and reasoning by engaging in meaningful dialogue that inspires new perspectives on complex topics.

Evening programs and instructions can also be a catalyst for leadership and social action. After sharing collective experiences or participating in a deep exploration of a hot topic issue, some campers feel inspired to take action on global issues in their local communities.

Kaitlin, a 2019 alumna, hoped to inspire her fellow campers to take action against discrimination after participating in an evening program on speaking up and speaking out. Alongside a group of fellow youth leaders, Kaitlin [organized an evening program](#) to observe campers' responses to aggressive situations and share their personal experiences with discrimination. The activity was framed around the theme of speaking up and making your voice heard.

[According to Kaitlin](#), "[the program facilitators] wanted to help each of the campers recognize their own worth, and that they are worthy of respect from others... I think a lot of the girls are motivated after it, and inspired to speak up for one another in situations

that are necessary.”

Constructive Feedback for Elevated Learning



As mentioned in [our blog on adult and peer mentorship](#), feedback is a critical tool in guiding campers to reflect, learn, and adjust behavior after an experience. Instructions and evening programs provide a unique space in the daily program for individuals to receive feedback from a group of peers.

A few minutes at the end of every instruction and evening program are set aside for the facilitators to solicit direct feedback from participants on the effectiveness of their presentation, content, and program design. Even staff-led instructions and evening programs have time set aside for feedback from campers in order to model how to effectively receive feedback and demonstrate that feedback is meaningful for lifelong learners at any age.

Few adolescents enter the camp program with the skills to provide quality, constructive feedback to peers. Staff and second year campers work together to model the feedback process and create an evening program on how to give feedback that is timely, specific, balanced, and meaningful to peers.

Setting aside structured time to give and receive feedback is so important to the experiential learning process. Constructive feedback sparks reflection and

helps campers identify strengths and areas to improve upon for their next instruction, evening program, or future leadership project after the program ends

5. Curriculum in Focus:

Building Your Own Structure

In this chapter, we will focus on how our curriculum provides self-structured opportunities for project management and collaboration that contribute to a stronger community.

Grab your hammer and safety goggles then let's get to work!

At Camp Rising Sun, participants have an opportunity to co-construct tangible projects that will improve the Camp community. If you could build something new in your neighborhood, what would it be? Over the years, our campers have painted large-scale murals, forged new hiking trails, and even built a wood-burning sauna.

Each project is thoughtfully designed by youth to make a meaningful contribution to the Camp community. While campers have produced some spectacular concrete products over the years, the real objective of project time is to provide multidimensional opportunities for collaboration, learning, exercising, and refining leadership skills.

Projects can have a long-term impact such as a boat storage rack, bridge, or lean-to; or short-term seasonal contribution such as a garden, clearing hiking trails, or cooking a meal.

In order for a project to be approved, it must go through the following steps:

1. At the beginning of the season, counselors guide participants through brainstorming sessions to generate ideas
2. Participants draft a proposal for a project that improves the campus or supports the needs of their micro community
3. Facilities staff work closely with participants to develop and fine tune the logistics of their project

4. Proposals are reviewed by staff for feasibility, safety, impact on the campsite, and sustainability

Campers whose proposals are approved become project leaders who are responsible for leading a group of peers to implement a proposed project from start to finish. Throughout the entirety of a project, youth leaders experience setbacks and challenges, but learn to persevere and follow through on their commitments even when it becomes challenging. A staff member is assigned to each project to provide safety oversight, technical training, and strategic guidance; however, the bulk of the project responsibilities fall upon the youth leaders.

In the process of managing a group project, youth leaders also develop experience in motivating peers through unexpected challenges. A project leader might assume it will only take a week to construct a circular bench. Once the project starts, the leader realizes that calculating and measuring the angles for each wooden slat might take a week on its own and will only require 3 of the 6 group members. How can the project leader ensure all group members are meaningfully engaged and excited to continue on the project with the adjusted timeline? These are the types of practical project management questions that youth leaders must navigate.

Constructing a Community Inside and Out

Strong relationship skills and the ability to effectively communicate and listen to others is a core tenant of the [social and emotional skills](#) that participants practice at Camp Rising Sun. That's why, as with [instructions](#), the end of each project period is set aside for daily feedback and reflection. During this time, team members reflect on what went well, what could have gone better, and what should be done differently moving forward. This is a great opportunity

to track progress towards the project goals and also resolve any interpersonal concerns or conflicts that are impacting the functionality of the team.

The best projects are those powered by a group of campers coming together as a team to accomplish their goals and make a difference in their community. Setting aside intentional time for reflection encourages constructive conflict resolution, which leads to stronger communication and better relationships among team members.

In fact, the entire project experience facilitates community development. The ability to make enduring physical modifications to the grounds contributes to a collective sense of pride and responsibility for the micro-community that campers develop throughout the summer season.



[According to Jackson and Oliver](#), two 2018 alums, “Working on the projects as well as being able to utilize them throughout the days as new parts of the campsite provides an amazing platform for campers to bond.”

Many participants have never used a hammer, saw, or power drill before arriving at Camp Rising Sun. Oliver and Jackson wrote that “As we are removed from where we feel comfortable, it makes the members of each project group become more

dependent on one another.” Stepping out of your comfort zone and relying on peers to teach you new skills is part of what makes project time such a great environment for making new friends.

Projects also connect campers to the broader LAJF community by leaving a legacy for future seasons. Some large-scale projects are even started in one camp season and completed or improved upon in years to come. These multi-year projects build connections with the broader LAJF community and serve as hallmarks of their experience. Alumni look back fondly on the projects they worked on during their time as campers and enjoy seeing how future generations build and expand upon their ideas.

Structured Opportunities for Self-management

It is not uncommon for campers to want to continue working on a project even after the allotted daily project time has ended. Especially toward the end of the summer, campers may choose to work on projects in their Self-Structured Time (SST) in order to complete their goals before the program ends.

At least 1 hour, though often more, is set aside each day for Self-Structured Time. SST provides an opportunity for campers to engage in activities that are not scheduled elsewhere in the program. It is tempting to refer to this program area as “free time;” however, SST is more meaningfully constructed to prepare campers with experiences in managing time, expectations, and personal care needs.

Being able to manage one’s own time in constructive and meaningful ways is a sign of mature leadership and self-management. Participants use SST in a variety of ways, including to:

- Prepare for an upcoming instruction
- Continue an existing project
- Take time for self-care and relaxation after a busy morning
- Organize a campus-wide soccer tournament

- Paint a portrait in the art cabin
- Practice a musical duet for the upcoming evening program

Learning how to prioritize self-care and structure one's own time can be challenging at first. It is important for adolescents to find a balance between taking care of personal care needs while also taking on new challenges and opportunities. Counselors are available to provide guidance and support in this realm.

Ultimately, campers are encouraged to use SST to pursue activities that further the program goals and take advantage of the unique opportunities provided in the program by making new friends, learning new skills, and expanding perspectives.

6. Curriculum in Focus:

Building Resilience Through Overnight Trips

In this chapter, we take a look at how overnight trips provide opportunities for teamwork and leadership under unfamiliar and challenging circumstances.



You've been daydreaming of s'mores by the campfire after an exhausting day of wandering the woods, but someone forgot to pack the marshmallows and the chocolate melted in the heat. To make matters worse, rain clouds are rolling in on the horizon and you haven't set up your tent yet. Moments like these, when campers are removed from the comforts of home and faced with the uncertainties of the outdoors, are when our participants learn the most about the power of mindset and overcoming adversity.

While most of the Rising Sun program takes place on our main campus, all of our participants embark on an overnight trip for 2-3 nights during the summer for a more rustic camping experience. These [overnight camping trips](#) are a chance for youth to work together on a sustained basis in a physically challenging, unfamiliar environment to overcome physical and mental obstacles.

Groups of 10-15 campers at a time are responsible for setting up their own campsite, cooking their own meals, and maintaining a campfire. During the trip, participants learn skills in:

- Compass orienteering
- Plant and insect identification
- Hanging a bear bag

- Basic survival skills like first aid
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Outdoor cooking and water filtration

Just as daily leadership roles are assigned on the main campsite, two participants are selected as youth leaders of each overnight trip as well. Together with the support of their assigned counselors, these young leaders are responsible for ensuring the team works together to complete a successful trip. This includes planning and preparation to make sure each group member packs the proper equipment and food (including the marshmallows).

Once on the trip, the group leaders are responsible for:

- Monitoring the pace of the group
- Delegating tasks such as cooking and fire duty, and
- Keeping up the high morale of the team

Youth leaders frequently consult with their counselors to determine how to overcome obstacles such as thunderstorms, forgotten equipment, or interpersonal conflicts. Counselors provide regular feedback to the group leaders to encourage them to think about the pace of the group and how the team members are reacting: *Do people seem tired? Does everyone in the group have a clear role? Do we have enough water or is it time to refill?*

This coaching helps youth leaders refocus their mindset back to the success of the group as a collective by providing practical advice and words of encouragement.

Personal and Collective Benefits of Being Outdoors

Spending time outdoors [can decrease stress](#) and anxiety, improve memory, boost creativity, and help individuals focus. Outdoor education programs, like the CRS overnight trips, also specifically help students develop [tolerance for uncertainty and adversity](#), as

reflected in the leadership model of the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS).

When it starts raining on the CRS main campus, students can easily go into a building to keep dry and know that dinner will still be served warm at 6pm. On a camping trip, students must persevere through the rain to build a shelter, cook dinner, and rely on each other for encouragement.

The simple fact that each member of the group is carrying a different ingredient for a meal in their backpack contributes to the sense of camaraderie in knowing each member is dependent on another for their "survival" on the trip.

Mohamed, a 2017 alum, found that the wilderness trip also helped develop teamwork and communication skills. "I worked with my team and we used the resources around us," [said](#) Mohamed. He continued, "We had to distribute food so that we could eat well for the three days, as well as filter our own water from the creek. I didn't know how to do any of these things before - but all we had to count on were our own capabilities."

The vulnerability that comes with being in a new environment can also lead to stronger relationships among group members. [According to Wyatt](#), a 2017 alum, "The camping trip at CRS made me really stretch outside my comfort zone, and I realized after the trip that when a group of people goes on an adventure that makes them nervous and vulnerable, a new, strong relationship is formed between the group."

Wyatt said, "There were people in my group that I did not know well before the wilderness trip, but that I now, after sharing the experience of the wilderness trip, feel closer with than friends I have known for years at home."

Preparing for a Safe Experience in the

"Wilderness"

Though the overnight camping trip is an overwhelmingly memorable experience for many of our alums, not everyone enters our program with a positive association with nature or the wilderness.

Some participants may experience [cultural discomfort](#) or be hesitant about the idea of going on an outdoor camping trip. The United States has a long history of racism associated with wilderness areas, rooted in the [forced removal](#) of Indigenous Peoples from their lands as well as racial [segregation in national parks](#) until the 1960s. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) may face [additional barriers](#) to wilderness activities, including access, affordability, ongoing discrimination, concerns of physical safety, and historical trauma.

At Camp Rising Sun, we recognize these barriers and work to provide necessary preparation for a safe and supportive camping experience. Prior to embarking on an overnight trip, participants attend a series of workshops by counselors trained in wilderness first aid and experienced in leading backpacking trips.

Counselors review important safety information and expectations before the trips, including:

- Poison ivy and tick prevention
- Hygiene procedures
- Clothing and packing tips
- Inclement weather protocol
- Fire building skills
- Wildlife precautions, and more

Participants who travel to CRS from across the U.S. and abroad often do not own, or cannot pack, specific backpacking equipment. CRS provides all necessary equipment at no cost, including backpacks, stoves, wool socks, tents, sleeping bags, bug spray, and hiking shoes and clothing as needed. We do not expect families to purchase specialty camping equipment for our program.

Since 2017, overnight trips have taken place on the CRS Red Hook property, located on 160 acres of mostly undeveloped forests and fields. Though campers feel completely isolated from the outside world, the nearest town is a mere five miles away.

The use of private property, and its close proximity to town, has several benefits, including:

- Assurance of security and safety for families and campers
- Isolation from outside groups of campers or park rangers
- Accessibility for those who would not otherwise be able to participate in a hiking trip due to physical or health reasons

Additionally, the overnight trips provide the added benefit of connecting our participants to our long history and traditions rooted in the Red Hook property.

In spite of some hesitations and nervousness that participants feel when they depart for the overnight trip, we find that campers return to the main campus proud of the challenges they overcame as a group and enthusiastic for the remainder of the program.

Andrew, a 2019 alum from New York City, captured this sentiment when [he said](#), "While I came into this hiking trip with a rather negative mentality, I came out of it with a newfound appreciation of my fellow campers and the bond that we will now share over the next two weeks."

7. Curriculum in Focus:

Creating Space for Meaningful Reflection

In this chapter, we will talk about how self-reflection and active listening are built into the experiential learning process.

At Camp Rising Sun, participants are constantly moving from one activity to the next in order to take advantage of the limited time they have together. However, without taking intentional time to reflect, participants may miss out on important learning opportunities.

Reflection is a core component of the recursive process of [experiential learning](#). That's why we've built intentional reflection activities into our program's curriculum.

Critical feedback and self-reflection help us:

- Process what went well and what went wrong in an experience
- Develop self-awareness of how our choices impact others
- Make meaning of a complex or confusing situation in a broader context
- Draw connections between multiple experiences
- Identify areas for improvement and set goals for the future

Each program area and leadership experience at CRS is paired with an intentional feedback activity. The last 10-15 minutes of each activity are set aside for peer-to-peer feedback in small groups. Feedback during [project time](#) often centers on brainstorming solutions to setbacks and resolving group dynamics. Feedback during [instructions](#) focuses on providing suggestions about how the presenter could improve their delivery of the lesson topic. These sessions are self-guided by participants with the support of counselors.

The ability to give and receive constructive feedback is a vital leadership skill we hope to instill in our participants. At the end of each day, the [leaders of the day](#) solicit feedback from the larger group on how their facilitation of the day impacted the community.



Afterwards, youth leaders complete a self-reflection journal and meet with their assigned counselor for one-on-one feedback the following day.

In addition to setting aside dedicated program time for peer feedback during instructions and projects, equal attention is devoted to providing opportunities to process that feedback in a variety of individual and collective spaces.

Alone with a Fire and a Notebook

The most prominent example of dedicated self-reflection at CRS is the overnight vigil. At the end of each season, participants keep vigil at their own campfire from sunset to sunrise. Throughout the evening, each person writes a letter, which is sealed without having been read by anyone but the writer, and is mailed back to them by the Foundation on their 21st birthday.

A Vigil is a time for campers to take a step away from the Camp community and reflect on the experience as a whole. A dedicated youth leader, under the guidance of an [adult mentor](#), is responsible for coordinating the logistics of the evening, including gathering firewood, assigning campsites, reviewing fire safety, and handing out proper supplies. Proper accommodations are made for individuals requiring to stay closer to the main building during the night.

It's hard to imagine, but there are actually 60 small campfire rings spread out throughout the trails on the main campus. Throughout the season, a dedicated project team clears these small campsites in preparation for vigil night.

While on the Vigil, each camper is expected to build and maintain a fire at their own site for the duration of the night. The strategic placement of the campsites creates an illusion of total isolation while in reality participants may be a mere 10 feet away from the nearest camper.

In the spirit of our philosophy of “independence within structure,” staff members seamlessly rove the trails throughout the evening to monitor the wellbeing of participants without interfering in the privacy of the reflective process.

An Opportunity for Solitude and Reflection

Vigils provide an extended opportunity for solitude and reflection, as well as a time for self-exploration and expression — all essential elements in the experiential learning process. This experience is meant to provide sufficient time for isolation and introspection.

This time was especially important for Andy, a 2017 alum. “The meaning of [the] vigil experience in my life was huge because after vigils I realized what an experience it was, and I was able to really reflect on who I am as a person,” [said Andy](#), adding, “I don’t have time to truly dedicate 9 hours for self reflection back home, so it was an amazing experience”

Vigils leave participants feeling centered and thoughtful about bringing the lessons of Camp into their lives as they prepare to return home.

[According to Leo](#), a 2018 alum, “during Vigil Night, I felt very calm and collected. I sat alone with just my fire and my thoughts. My mind was racing with all sorts of ideas to include in my letter, and I spent hours upon hours writing and reflecting on my life.”

Intentional Space to Share from the Heart

Whereas vigils are a culminating activity for individual introspection, several activities are coordinated in the lead-up to vigils that provide guided reflective practice in how to listen and share from the heart.

At Camp Rising Sun, we use weekly circle spaces to:

- Build community and trust among group

members

- Share openly and be heard, voice concerns, and explore identity
- Create an intentional space - clearly different from “everyday life” that makes a special, calming atmosphere and indicates time for reflection
- Help participants reflect on their purpose in life and set goals for the future

Wisdom Circles are a form of group practice where people sit together in a circle to listen and speak openly. The focus of the activity is to deepen the values of authenticity, caring, trust and openness to change.

Campers and counselors are assigned to a weekly circle that acts as a support group throughout the entire season. Each week, groups meet to reflect on common themes that adolescents may experience throughout the progression of the season.

Some of the topics covered in weekly circles include:

- Goal setting: students share hopes and fears for the upcoming season and set goals for their participation in the program
- Forming community: students reflect on the health of the community midseason through a series of “I” statements about their sense of inclusion and happiness in the program
- Returning home: students prepare to return home and consider how things may have changed while they were away and strategies to help with the transition

Later in the evening, these smaller groups converge in an all-group campfire, where selected counselors and campers take turns sharing introspective stories and musical performances, followed by important community leadership announcements.

Talking circles have been (and continue to be) used by Indigenous cultures around the world as a sacred listening space for thousands of years. Sometimes called peacemaking circles, these traditions have influenced many circle processes today including [restorative justice](#) practices in schools and communities.

While CRS reflects the value, as [Randy Woodley describes](#), in being “able to hear our own hearts and our own stories in a safe space,” wisdom circles at CRS do not attempt to replicate any practices that are sacred or specific to particular Indigenous cultures.

To read more about LAJF’s ongoing efforts to address and prevent cultural misappropriation in our program, [click here](#).

8. Curriculum in Focus:

Cultivating Globally-Conscious Leaders

newspaper has served as a record of the season and a source of discussion about world events. In the early years, participants would publish a weekly newspaper, which included stories, features, commentaries, and the occasional literary contribution.

In today's world of information bubbles, "fake news," and social media, the focus of the journalism program has shifted to include an emphasis on critical media literacy and world affairs. Rather than publish a printed newspaper, participants now produce a weekly blog, which is posted internally and also published online to provide updates to parents and alums.

The objectives of the journalism program are to:

- Create a brief, curated, weekly record of events during the program
- Offer a public way to post the record and also elicit comments among participants
- Publish the record broadly on the LAJF website to communicate relevant updates to the "outside world" of parents and alumni
- Lead discussions of problems and opportunities in news media and global politics

Through the journalism program, we encourage participants to become discerning users of media by comparing their recollections of the program's events to how they were presented by peers in the weekly blog.

Making Global Connections

At Camp Rising Sun, participants have a rare opportunity to interact with individuals who are directly impacted by social and political events happening around the world. Staff members create opportunities for campers to draw on their personal experiences and participate in meaningful intercultural dialogue on a variety of sociopolitical topics.

Our dedicated Journalism & World Affairs Counselors provide participants with access to news sources that provide global perspectives. Counselors also encourage campers to engage in abstract thinking about media and draw connections between current events around the world.



Throughout the season, counselors organize numerous opportunities for discussion on global affairs and politics through [evening programs and instructions](#). Past workshops have included topics such as:

- **The Complexity of Peace & Conflict:** What causes conflict? Why is peace building so challenging? Through discussions and real life examples, participants aim to understand the complexity and humanity of selected phenomena.
- **Intro to Media Literacy:** The instruction introduces 5 principles of critical media analysis through interactive activities corresponding to each principle
- **Comparative World Press:** Participants compare and contrast the front pages from a wide variety of world newspapers on a given date.
- **Sourcing:** Participants debate the ethics of news media to quote sources "on the condition of anonymity."
- **Refugee Crises:** This workshop teaches solidarity values, and serves as a discussion on how countries could act to solve these

humanitarian crises as well as how people can support refugees on an individual level.

- **Freedom Timeline:** What is freedom? What does freedom feel like? Together, participants create an interactive, non-linear timeline of freedom struggles across the world.
- **Zines:** Participants make their own zines while learning about their history and political impact, presenting zines as a form of alternative journalism and historical record.
- **“Both Sides.”** Participants consider whether journalists are obligated to present “both sides” of a controversy or whether the focus on “both sides” can lead to the spread of misinformation.

After participating in our program, campers return home feeling more personally connected to the stories they read and watch on the world news. As our Executive Director, Helene Mattera, [wrote](#), “The stories are not about some far-off place or unknown people. Those affected have a name and a face.”

Lifelong Global Impact of CRS

Inspired by the intercultural learning experience of Camp Rising Sun, many of our alums go on to pursue their global interests through international careers. For Sofia Logan, who attended CRS in 2011 and 2012, hearing from campers and counselors with complex, interdisciplinary global interests helped put her own passions into focus.

“After talking in-depth with counselors and campers about how they weave together diverse interests, those two years [as a camper] taught me that I could carve my own path in the world and be curious about everything,” [said Sofia](#), who went on to combine her interests in environmental justice and international relations with music and dance.

Sofia returned to CRS as a counselor in 2016 and 2017. [According to Sofia](#), “CRS created a space for me to process my experiences abroad, and learn from campers, reinforcing my love of ethnomusicology - the study of music in different cultures.” Sofia Logan recently released her first album, [“Waiting for You, Waiting for Me.”](#) which blends together her interests

in environmental justice and ethnomusicology.

For many of our participants, CRS is the first step on a lifelong journey of global learning and social action. After living alongside individuals from over 30 countries for 4 weeks, our participants return home to fulfill our philosophy of serving society as ethical leaders in pursuit of humanitarian goals.

As Sama, a 2019 alum, [said in a reflection](#) on her CRS experience: “Before we even knew it, we created a large family that dispersed to its many homes, creating a newly formed network of thoughtful, committed, citizens that became agents of change no matter where they may be.”

Check out our [Alumni Beings & Doings](#) to learn more about how past participants are living our mission in their lives back home.

1. *Excerpts of this series were derived from the Camp Rising Sun Curriculum Guide. For a full copy of our curriculum, please email contact@lajf.org*