

Summer camps are a big question mark this year

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

Just like with everything else, we are all sitting around with our fingers crossed — and some family members are dreaming of sitting around a campfire. May is the month we typically devote to our entire issue to the Summer Camp Preview. This year things are looking a little different.

Thankfully, most summer camps in Eastern Oregon are primed and ready to open the second they get the all clear from the state. Virtually every camp is still taking reservations and even accepting applications for those interested in working with kids.

The kicker, of course, is the waiting game. Most camps are prepping for some changes that include a ramped-up cleaning schedule and



taking the temperatures of campers, volunteers, and staff. Sleepover camps will rearrange bunks if nec-

essary to accommodate for social distancing. They are all just waiting for the good word from the state.

Pendleton Parks and Recreation has begun discussing contingency plans, but has high hopes that things will be back to a relative normal by the middle of June. Their week-long Adventure Camps have room for a total of 96 elementary-aged children, a number that could greatly reduce the childcare burden of parents returning to work. As in years past, PP&R will keep prices very low at only \$30 for a four-day camp that includes lunch.

"We've been lucky to continue to be able to offset the cost of camp through the use of the city's general fund," says PP&R Program Director Jon Bullard. "We know that the camps provide something valuable for the community and look forward to providing an enriching experience for the kids."

All camps are offering full refunds if they aren't able to go on as planned or the dates get pushed back and the new ones don't work

for parents. Camp directors are anxious to be able to open. Joe Wing, director of Camp Elkanah, sympathizes with families: "This might be the first normal thing our kids can do this summer."

But one issue for some camps might be a numbers game, depending on whether enough campers sign up. While no camp wants to turn children away, they can only do what is feasible. As Buckaroo Bible Camp board member Marty Campbell says, "There is a time when economics kicks in."

Why are these camps so important? Our children have suffered trauma as a result of the COVID-19 shutdown. They've lost their school routines, their teachers, and their peers. Some children may be stuck in a place that is also home to a drug user, a child abuser, or a domestic violence predator. To these kids, school and camp are safer alternatives to home.

Summer camps offer respite from boredom and allow opportunities for education and emotional growth. Many children flourish in a setting that is more structured than hanging out at home. Children become independent and self-confident, learn social skills, and make new friends.

Diana Ellis is an elementary school teacher and mother of three. "Summer camps have been a part of our kids' lives for as long as we can remember," she says. "It would be a shame to miss out on that this year."

Suzanne Kennedy is a former middle school teacher who lives in Pendleton with her husband and four children.

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