

# 15 MINUTES

## Summer camp heats up at local park

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Lunch hour traffic sat in the sun at a red light on Palm Beach Boulevard and Ortiz Avenue. Drivers with their windows down might have heard the clamoring voices and dribbles echoing from 8-to-11-year-olds going one-on-one or racing each other across the court at Schandler Hall Community Park's basketball court.

Most of them were enrolled in one of the Lee County Parks & Recreation summer camps, but a few had shown up just to find some fun and burn off part of a long, free summer day.

"We have some kids that probably can't afford to come to camp but the kids know 'em and if they come around we let them play," Counselor Herb Brown Jr. said. "One boy named Zach comes around; he sticks around and follows the rules."

Brown, 57, watched them closely from a bench with fellow counselor Faye Jennings. He's big and calm and his voice shoots across the court with ease later, when he calls out to kids that it's time for lunch.

They were all out on the court for a daily basketball session before lunch. Brown said most of the players are from his neighborhood, just two blocks away in Tice. A few are from North Fort Myers.

"We get a good mixture of kids," he said. "All our kids are from different sorts of backgrounds. We get down to their level and just let them know we're here to have fun."

The camp goes on every day from 8 a.m. until parents arrive to pick up their

children at 6 p.m., eight weeks out of the summer. Parents enroll children on a weekly basis, so they tend to come and go sporadically. Brown keeps track of all the names and faces, and arranges activities to fill the day.

Most mornings he takes the group on a jog around the softball field, and records their heart rate before and after. And sometimes they're hard to keep up with.

"Our kids - they're full of energy, so they keep us full of energy," he said.

Brown is also leading them in writing a book about their experience at camp, he said. This morning he provided a topic to get them started, which was "What does the flag mean to me?"

"Every day they do a little writing," he said. "And they use their own imagination and I tell them, 'it can't be right or wrong.'"

Later in the afternoon after lunch, the group goes swimming. Brown said they alternate between indoor and outdoor activities. At some point during the week, they'll all check out a book from the Lee County's Mobile Library when it stops by the park.

The camp is one of about 30 for children in Lee County. It costs parents \$60 per week.

"Very seldom do we hear kids say they're bored," Brown said. "I like to see them think. The kids this age have a unique look on their face when they learn something or are excited..."

"The County's really in for making sure the kids get the benefit of everything. Not only just fun, but lifelong skills."

Some of the neighborhood kids keep coming back year after year, and he's watched



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Counselor Herb Brown Jr. with some of his summer camp boys.

them grow. He didn't recognize one boy who showed up with a short haircut this summer.

"He's always had the long hair," Brown said.

Brown became a counselor at the camp three years ago when he started looking for a summer job.

During the rest of the year, he's a personal fitness teacher at Riverdale High School.

He is originally from LaBelle, has four grown children and has been a teacher in the area for 24 years. Brown knows most of the kids well, if not by name, then by sight. Even

when he's not at work he runs into them, "all the time and in no particular place."

Most stop to say hi.

"Sometimes it gives you the jitters, because you think 'I got on that kid real hard,' Brown said. "But even if you have to discipline a kid, they seem to still have that respect for you."

Sometimes he gets the chance to talk to them about what the point of all this summer camp activity is.

"It's not to be big like me, but to grow," Brown said. "That's what I talk to them about, just growing, maturing, becoming a better person." ■

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