

A bright summer ahead for Central Hills Baptist Retreat

By Tony Martin

Editor

Since its beginnings in 1979 as a camp for Royal Ambassadors, Central Hills Baptist Retreat has ministered to thousands of campers.

So, what is the validity of camp ministry in 2024?

“The simple answer is 114,” said Shane Thrash, camp manager. “That’s how many professions of faith we had last summer. We had 101 the year before that, and a hundred the year before that. Then you have to drop to pre-Covid times. But that’s the whole reason we have horses, rifles, swimming, pool, lake, zip lines, all that stuff. It’s amazing. That draws in kids so we can tell them about Jesus. To see those professions of faith, to see those kids when their eyes light up, when they get it – that’s amazing.”

Thrash states he wasn’t raised in church. “I didn’t come to camp at Central Hills until I was in college,” he said. “Dan West [camp manager at the time] came to Jones County Junior College, and I came to Central Hills in 1998. I fell in love with camp ministry, even sleeping in tents all summer, working with those RAs when it was an all-boys camp. When we had that campfire service, which is a tradition here at Central Hills, and seeing those kids who gave me the most fits that week, come down with tears in their eyes and give their lives to Christ – man, I was locked in.”

In 2015, Thrash was working at William Carey University when Provost Scott Hummel asked him to set up a disaster relief program for the university. “I called Don Gann, who was [Mississippi Baptist Convention Board] Men’s Ministry director

at the time. I'd never met Don before. He came down and met with me and started telling me all about disaster relief and how all their equipment was housed at Central Hills. I told him how much I loved Central Hills, and that I'd worked there in '98 and '99. He told me there was an opening there, and about a week later, he asked me if I'd send my resume to him. One thing led to another, and here I am."

Thrash has primary responsibility for what type of programming happens at Central Hills. He notes that there are some things that have to go through the leadership of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, but he sets the themes for the summer.

"We're constantly adding activities and looking at things," Thrash said. "I'm currently serving as president-elect for the Deep South section of the National Christian Camps and Conference Association. What that means is when in February I roll into the president's role, I get to meet with camp managers from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana and talk with them. I'm going to be traveling to their camps, seeing what they're doing, and seeing what might work here as we continue to grow and add new things to our camps."

When asked what this summer's programming would look like, Thrash said, "Our theme is a superhero theme. We're still nailing down the specifics of that, but it's looking at superheroes in the Bible, a superheroes for Jesus kind of thing.

"Our standard day is that we get up and do our big Bible study in the morning group time," he continued. "We have a breakout time, and then we have small groups in the afternoons filled with all the camp activities. We come back together at night for another large group worship time. That varies depending on the style of camp. We do two or three different styles of camp, but that's basically the schedule."

Central Hills hosted 2,069 campers in 2023. In 2019, the camp hosted 2,804 campers. "We're about six or seven hundred off what we'd gotten up to before Covid," Thrash said. "But registration doesn't officially open until January 15. We already have one or two camps that are almost full, three-quarters full. We've opened a little early for folks who came last year, but after official registration opens, I'm anticipating close to 2,500."

Other plans for facilities are in the works.

"We're looking at a complete renovation of the lodges [Carey and Curtis]," Thrash said. "We'll completely tear out the bathrooms and redo them. We'll repaint all the walls, put in new LED lights, and new flooring in the main lobbies. We'll take the old siding off and put Hardie board all the way around the buildings. There will be new windows and a new front porch covering." The activities building will get an overhaul on the outside, including a new porch.

Other long-range plans include an indoor worship center and a five-and-a-half-acre lake.

"The intentions are to eventually build an adult retreat conference center," Thrash said. "If we do that, we want to make sure that all our kids' camp stuff is here and the adults have a serene view of the lake."

Thrash was frank about immediate needs.

"We need to recruit more summer staff," he said. "We talk about the effects of Covid. When you lose the continuity of a staff for a year, for places like Garaywa and Central Hills – we build our staff off of returning staff, and even the ones who aren't returning talk about their memories here. Even with just a year off, you have kids who graduate from college and move on. They're not at the colleges anymore to help you recruit. Our staff this past summer was phenomenal. We only had 31, though. I'd like to get to about 40 this summer."

Thrash wants churches to know that Central Hills is available for their own camps. "They can call us, or just look on our Facebook page."

For those interested in serving on summer staff, they can contact Thrash at sthrash@mbcb.org. "We need college kids, ages 18 to 25. If anyone wants a summer job and wants to serve Jesus, there are ministry opportunities galore. We'd love to talk to them."