

Central Hills summer camp preparation heats up

By Tony Martin, Editor

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Central Hills Baptist Retreat is gearing up for summer ministries. The calendar is full, and the staff is prepared.

Shawn Parker, executive director-treasurer of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB), visited the staffers on May 21 to encourage and affirm their ministries.

“What they’re going to be part of this summer here at Central Hills is going to affect hundreds, thousands of kids,” Parker said. “And so their willingness to be here, in my opinion, I think reflects the fact that they’re open to the Holy Spirit’s leadership and they’re the cream of the crop spiritually. And so I’m honored to be here to be able to share some words of encouragement with them because I think they really are the heartbeat of Mississippi Baptist life.”

According to Dwayne Parker, director of the Discipleship/Sunday School Department, MBCB, Central Hills will have about 50 summer staffers. The group is mainly college students and a couple of high school students. About half of those are returning staff.

“It has been really, really encouraging just to see their leadership and their maturity,” Parker said. “They’ve embraced our new staff, just phenomenal. It’s been really encouraging to see the unity among the staff. And so I feel really strong about the staff that we have for the 2024 camp season.”

When asked about why it was important for Mississippi Baptists to care about Central Hills and what God has done there, Parker said, “If you talk to people across the state, you’ll

find that hundreds, thousands of people through the years have been affected by camp here, either as a camper or maybe as a counselor, or maybe even a chaperone. And so I know from those stories that God has used this place in a wonderful way.

“I’m going to go even beyond that and say, though I was never a camper here at Central Hills, I was a camper at a Baptist camp, and I know firsthand the impact it made on my life. And I know that the Holy Spirit works in these settings in special and unusual ways. Mississippi Baptists are about making disciples, and this is as fundamental in the process of making disciples as you’re going to find in the state.”

“My first year I served, I came into the mindset of like, okay, this is the summer job. I don’t have anything else to do,” said Ali-Anne Long, a second-year staffer from Southwest Community College who plans to attend William Carey University in the fall. “I’m fresh out of my freshman year in college. I just need some money. And then I just really saw the heart of Central Hills, and how it changed my life and how it just impacted my heart and discernment for children. I love children and I want to be like a children’s minister whenever I grow up. Coming back is something that me and my future fiancé or future husband talked about because it was going to be hard. But also I’m called to do it and we support each other in that. And that’s why I’m here.”

Dwayne Parker shared that the first camp of the summer is Camp Ruby, a special needs camp that spends a week at Central Hills. Central Hills primarily provides activities for them. Following that are two weeks of Student Connect Camp, which will last through the end of June. There should be 150 to 200 students participating.

“Afterwards,” Parker said, “we roll into two weeks, but it’ll be four sessions of what we call Kids Connect Camp. That’ll take us through the end of June. And then starting in July, we begin with Children’s camp and we’ll have two sessions of

children's camp for the remainder of July. We should end up the summer with somewhere around 3,000 campers here, take a little here or there, but somewhere in that neighborhood. It's going to be a jam-packed summer ... I think overall we have more registered this summer than we've had since 2019. And so that's exciting to see that happen."

"Coming into this summer, it's exciting to see new kids," said Bradon Epting, a second-year staffer from Meridian Community College who will be attending Mississippi State University in the fall. "We'll have new kids and possibly kids who have just never heard the gospel before. Maybe even kids who have never even been in church before. They're not churched kids, they just came with a friend to camp. And so it's good to see the Lord really work in those kids and seeing the Holy Spirit draw them to Jesus. There's just nothing like seeing a kid give their life to Christ. And so that's what we're here for, to labor for the sake of the gospel and see the gospel do what the gospel does, and we're just super excited to watch and see what all God does this summer."