

Garaywa Camp and Conference Center gears up for summer

By Tony Martin

Editor

“Growing up, camp was a place to get away from your everyday routine and focus on your walk with the Lord or even start a relationship with the Lord,” said Roddy Reed, camp manager at Garaywa Camp and Conference Center.

The validity of camp ministry is important to Mississippi Baptists, and Garaywa is a critical part of filling that niche.

“People get away from all their normal stuff. They get in a retreat setting and they can focus on what God is doing,” Reed said. “We guide them into that, whether it’s becoming a new believer, hearing the Gospel for the first time or the hundredth time, and they finally hear it in a place that is truly focused on them.”

“What I love about camp is that it throws everybody out of their comfort zone,” said Jordan East, camp director. “Once you’re out of that and you accept that, then you’re willing to try new things. So we give campers the opportunity to do great fun stuff like the zipline and to use their creativity with crafts and other things like that. We show them in day-to-day activities: God is still here, and you don’t have to be in a church setting in order to grow.”

Many in ministry can trace their call back to Garaywa, including Jim Futral, executive director-treasurer emeritus, Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, and Jerry Rankin, former president, International Mission Board.

“When my first summer working as a camp staffer, I remember

that, as a twin, my brother backed out,” said East. “I went ahead because I was scared to tell him I couldn’t come. But I went and during staff week I remember thinking, ‘I can’t do this.’ I called my mom crying and Mom said, ‘Well, Jordan, have you prayed about it?’ I told her no, I’m talking to you. And she said, ‘Pray about it,’ and hung up. I remember telling the Lord, ‘I’m scared to death. I can’t do it and I don’t know why You called me here.’ We were doing the rock wall, and the next day God gave me Psalms 18:29. It literally says ‘with my God, I can scale a wall.’ This was the first time God gave me the Bible to answer a prayer. That was a pivotal point in my life.” East has been on staff at Garaywa for six years in March.

Reed grew up in Edwards Church, Edwards. He had attended Central Hills Baptist Retreat as an RA in the fifth grade.

“My second summer there as an RA I accepted Christ as my savior,” Reed said. “In 1989 I was in my second year of college and I applied to work at Ridgecrest, Glorietta, and Gulf Shores to work summer camps. I didn’t even apply at Central Hills.

In 1989, Reed did work at Central Hills. It was there he felt God’s call into camp ministry and served five years there on summer staff. Reed was camp manager at the Northwest Baptist Association camp after finishing seminary before being called to serve at Garaywa.

“January 3, 2001, was my first day, and I literally got my feet wet because a room had flooded at Patterson Place,” Reed joked.

In 2019 Garaywa went coed. “We added a family camp,” East said. “To be honest, that’s probably my new favorite camp. It’s a unique experience that you get to come and experience camp as a family.



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“We are planning to replace our cabins with lodges,” Reed said. Tentative plans call for double-decker lodges with bathrooms.

“We don’t want to lose the traditions of Garaywa and the fun things that make us who we are,” East said. “But our updated lodges would be great because we don’t have to use the bathhouses any more. That’s exciting in itself.”

Since Garaywa began in 1947, many lives have been impacted. Through 2023, there Garaywa has hosted 140,034 summer campers. There have been 5,905 professions of faith, 4,916 rededications, and 2,548 calls to missions. There have been 339,270 other guests for a grand total of 479,304 people who’ve been ministered to at Garaywa.

East said, “We want to partner with churches and meet their needs. We want to get the word out there that churches can rent our facilities.”

“We have a good backbone of returners who come to every conference,” said Reed. “But we have to work between them to host other groups. Several denominations come through us. The common theme is Jesus.”

“Sometimes people get confused with coming to camp here,” East said. “They think they have to be GA’s or at a missions camp. I love that and we’ll continue to do that, but technically you don’t have to be a GA to come to our girls camp.”

Both Reed and East want Mississippi Baptists to know that there is a real need for summer staff. For more information, contact East at jeast@garaywa.org.

For more comprehensive and detailed information about the ministry of Garaywa Camp and Conference Center, visit Garaywa.org.