

# Camp ZAP

Woodlake Police Chief John Zapalac enlightens kids with camp at his Lemon Cove ranch

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SUN-GAZETTE

An old black and white bus drives slowly up and down the winding dirt roads in the foothills of Lemon Cove. It resembles something from a movie, where prisoners are transported to a remote location to spend their days contemplating their life's choices. As the bus emerges from the distance, decals reading "Police Explorers" and "DARE" can be seen before it comes to a stop at a ranch on Avenue 324 north of Highway 198.

It's not shackled prisoners but 15 eager kids that jump off the bus wearing backpacks and carrying sleeping bags. However, they will be asked to contemplate the choices they will have to make in the future during a weekend at the ranch home of Woodlake Police Chief John Zapalac.

Called Camp Zap, Zapalac and his wife, Minerva, invite children of all ages to come up for the weekend to experience camping, canoeing, horse riding and, more importantly, learning why it is important to stay in school and out of trouble. Zapalac said the Woodlake Police Department has seen about an 8-9% decrease in juvenile crime since it began six years ago.

"A lot of these kids come from single-parent and low-income homes who don't have many opportunities to get out of town and see what's beyond Woodlake," said Zapalac, who holds the camp every three months. "The relationships we build with the kids at a young age help prevent problems when



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Sam Hernandez helps three boys get clean up a canoe to paddle through the pond at Camp Zap during Easter weekend.

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they are in high school."

Once off the bus, the kids scramble to a variety of different activities. Six boys immediately headed for a pond that was filled by rain for the first time in many years. Zapalac's father-in-law, Sam Hernandez, helps the boys clean out a metal canoe at the water's edge. After putting life jackets on, the boys ease into the boat and are then handed oars. The other two watch from a small dock as the boys try to coordinate a canoe for the first time. Two boys row out of synch on the same side, diagonally moving away from the land. After about an hour, they begin to grasp the nuances of working together.

"There are no cliques on the canoe," Zapalac says as he watches the boys. "They have to find a way to work together or get stuck on the pond."

Another boy wandered near the fence by one of the cows a few feet away, as if he had never seen one that close. A few others began playing basketball but then stopped once they noticed a herd of cattle grazing on a portion of the ranch's 20 acres. Later in the afternoon, many of the kids piled onto a trailer pulled by Zapalac's tractor. The hayride is a favorite of the kids and annual entry into the camp's photo album.

Zapalac started the camp as a picnic and barbeque to get to know Woodlake's youth. Many officers come out to the camp to play games and supervise activities for the kids. It quickly grew into an overnight adventure that left an impression on each of the kids.

Lizet Guzman, a freshman at Woodlake Union High School, has been attending the camp for



four years. "It was my first time to ever go camping," Guzman said. "It's really a lot of fun."

For the last year, Guzman has been a Police Explorer and mentor to the children at the camp. She said she continues to come back and help organize activities at the camp.

Normally the camp hosts anywhere from 30-120 fourth through eighth graders, but recent rains, the Easter weekend and Spring Break made for less campers. Daytime activities such as volleyball, hiking and horseback riding were not held at the most recent camp because of the damp weather. Following a barbecue dinner, the children gather in the barn for a guest speaker. This year's speaker was Frank Escobar, Jr., Youth Development Coordinator for Tulare County, who talked to the campers about how their choices will impact their life later on.

Escobar said it was his first year at the camp, but immediately recognized how much time and resources were put into making it a real positive experience. He said the camp is a great tool to draw kids into a positive message, but the real significance of

the camp is the people involved, not the activities. "Anyone can go camping but that doesn't mean it is always a positive experience," he said. "If you go camping and someone is yelling at you the whole time, you will not hold onto to that as a positive memory. Everyone [at Camp Zap] is a positive caring adult, the kind of person many of these kids may not have or have enough of in their lives. It's a real credit to Chief and his volunteers."

At night, the kids sleep in bunk rooms separated for boys and girls or camp out in tents on the barn floor. When the weather is nice, most of the kids choose to camp near the fire pit in front of the Zapalac home and barn. In the morning, they help clean up, gather their gear and get back onto the bus headed back into Woodlake.

"Once the kids start to see an officer as an authority figure they can trust, they are more likely to stay out of trouble and respect that person," Zapalac said. "This program has been great for building relationships that really benefit the kids and the officers for many years."