

# HIGHTOPS

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## A camp where kids learn to learn

BY JULIE A. NJAIM  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

When Chris Csehi's mom went to give her a hug before leaving her at camp, the angry teenage said, "Fine, just leave me."

Not having much interest in school, Chris wasn't looking forward to spending 10 days of summer vacation with more than 100 people she didn't know, learning how to learn.

But in little more than a week at a Learning Forum SuperCamp near Chicago, the St. Paul's High School (Norwalk, O.) Sophomore says she gained skills that will last a lifetime.

At the camp, "We don't teach content," says Bobbi DePorter, president of Learning Forum, the organization which runs the SuperCamp. "We teach skills . . . lifelong learning skills."

"There are plenty of academic enrichment programs at various colleges and universities, but none identical to the SuperCamp," says Jeff Solomon, executive director for the National Camp Association, New York, NY, a nationwide and worldwide free public referral and guidance service.

Although there's nothing exactly like the SuperCamp with the intensive, motivational, self-esteem program, some camps work with outward bound themes, steering away from academics and increasing self-confidence, Mr. Solomon says. The wilderness camps, which focus on physical activity and endurance, can have a ripple effect on a student exceeding at school.

SuperCamp, he says, may not be for every student. Some teens who suffer



*A few weeks spent at this summer retreat may help make better students*

from low self-esteem might not find a 10-day program fitting. It might be too intense or too short for a person to benefit, he says.

But, he adds, SuperCamp succeeds because of its recognition for having really improved study skills and self-esteem.

Chris now is carrying a 3.7 grade point average compared to last year's 2.5. Her toughest subject was English. Last year she got two C's, a D and an F. So far this year she's brought her grades up to a C, A+, and B+.

St. Paul's guidance counselor Don Klausing says he doesn't know Chris well, but noticed a distinct change in her from her freshman to sophomore year.

"I say a retiring person, kind of

reserved. She comes back from this camp, I see somewhat of a transformation or conversion. Her grades are tremendous," Mr. Klausing says. "I see a smiling lady. (Before, her) attempts were mediocre at best, but there seems to be this energy, enthusiasm, and brighter outlook. She told me of the program, I said wow, it's made a world of difference in the end results."

Often students have poor grades and "they feel like they are the problem," Mrs. DePorter says. "They say, 'OK, work harder,' but they don't know how to work harder." Campers spend classroom time learning speed-reading, note-taking, and memorization techniques in addition to writing and working in group discussion formats. Lessons are active, visual and colorful, Mrs.

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DePorter says.

Creating an environment conducive to learning is a must. The time of day, lighting, seating, is all taken into account for every individual's prime-learning time.

A series of tests evaluates each camper's learning styles. Basically, Mrs. DePorter says, people learn by seeing, by hearing, or by doing. Once students determine how they learn, they can take these skills and apply them at school and throughout their lives.

"When I study now, I have to talk my way through it," Chris says. "My friends all think I'm an idiot, but I'm doing something to really learn it."

"Before, I just sat there and thought, Gee, when is this class going to be over? I didn't really care," she says, "I just wanted assignments done. I didn't care how they were done. Now, not only does it have to be done, it has to be good."

Chris credits her new-found motivation and confidence to SuperCamp.

"It's the support of everyone that makes you want to get out and do it."

How does that motivation last after those 10 days? It's difficult to explain, Chris says, but knowing you can do it makes all the difference.

The Oceanside, California based SuperCamp organization teaches learning through academic and confidence-building techniques.

Since its 1982 start, more than 16,000 students have graduated from the summer camp which is held primarily on college campuses throughout the United States, in Singapore, Hong Kong, and England.

Three camps will be held this summer at Spring Arbor College in Spring Arbor, Michigan, about 75 miles from Toledo, west of Jackson, Michigan. A junior high camp will be July 10-19. Two high school camps are July 22-31 and August 3-12.

The learning strategy is also found in Mrs. DePorter's book, *Quantum Learning: Unleashing the Genius in You* (Dell, \$10.95).

In addition, the camp's founder has taken the quantum approach into traditional classrooms.

Camping programs are divided into grade school, junior high, high school, and college divisions. Tuition ranges from

\$1,095 to \$1,595 depending on the level.

Making campers feel good about themselves and letting them know they can be who they are without putting on fronts is foremost in the training, Mrs. DePorter says.

Unlike school, there aren't any social cliques - everybody gets along, says Sean McDonagh, a Central Catholic High School senior and 1992 camper. He attended a camp at Lake Forest Academy, near Chicago.

"Teens fell like for who they are," Mrs. DePorter says, "They don't have to act a certain way."

The first thing campers do is break out in small groups and take time to get to know each other. The days are long, beginning at 7:30 a.m. and ending around 11 p.m. for high school students. But the time passes quickly, Chris says, because in between classes there are breaks when campers can swim, play volleyball, and socialize.

"It was a little community setup In a matter of a day or so, everyone felt comfortable with each other. It wasn't reality, but it was nice," Sean says.

"It was almost like a seminar, but not quite as boring as you think of a seminar. What they do is make you want to learn," he explains. "A lot of the stuff I learn in school, I'll never use or remember. A lot of that stuff (learned at SuperCamp) was realistic."

Sean, Chris, and most of the other student campers don't arrive excited about spending 85 hours learning, says Mrs. DePorter. Camp "doesn't draw students. It draws parents."

Today, Sean still resent the fact that he had to go, but admits, "As stubborn as I am, I really did learn something."

Dave, Sean's father, recalls picking up his son after camp and asking him to rate the experience on a scale of 1 to 10. He gave it an 8-1/2, Mr. McDonagh says.

Sean says his reading comprehension has gone up, but his grades haven't.

"That's my own fault, I do what I have to do to get by."

The camp experience, he says, helped him open his mind.

Chris' mother, Judy Fegen, learned about SuperCamp through friends. "We

were not happy with her grades or her attitude," says Mrs. Fegen.

After camp, she has noticed a difference. "We've seen a much happier child," Mrs. Fegen says, "She will talk out difficulties now, rather than just stomping off."

Chris talks excitedly about the ropes course when she scale a 30-foot pole and jumped off.

"You're on the ground thinking I can do this," Chris says, recalling the anticipation of climbing the tall pole. "Then you get up there and you start shaking. You have no control over it; but everyone's on the ground cheering you on - that helps."

The ropes course incorporates outdoor physical challenges, teaching students to trust and depend on each other. Some teams fall backwards, allowing peers to catch them, or a couple might team-travel across a tightrope or scale a pole.

Not to worry, the campers are completely secured in harnesses.

The physical challenge is a metaphor for the barriers students often feel academically, Mrs. DePorter says. The ropes course gives campers a chance to push themselves farther than they thought they could go and helps them realize they can break through walls of learning by increasing



SuperCamp's ropes course offers participants the opportunity to challenge self-perceptions and discover personal success.