

Camp Tyler Outdoor School - History

Camp Tyler Outdoor School (CTOS) started as a wonderful dream that has become a 385-acre treasure on the shores of picturesque Lake Tyler. Conceived by the Tyler Kiwanis, with help from D.K. and Lottie Caldwell, the idea began as a simple project to create a location for the Camp Fire Boys and Girls to have summer camp. As word grew, other civic organizations joined with an eye to include additional participation in youth summer camps. The passion to develop a community camp grew from seeing youth lose their roots to the land, nature, and soil as Tyler was becoming a more urban area. Soon the effort involved almost the entire Smith County community.

Chartered in 1945 as the Smith County Youth Foundation (SCYF), Camp Tyler was designed to serve all youth organizations and schools. When the father of outdoor education, L.B. Sharp of New York, was brought to Smith County to advise the SYCF, he said it was the first camp in the U.S. that was “specifically planned and built for year-round, community-school camp purposes.” Construction of the facilities was done cooperatively by and for the whole community. In the late 40s, the community raised \$250,000 for the project. Much of the actual work was done by skilled craftsmen who worked at their jobs during the week and then built the camp on weekends and in the evenings. In 1948 the first youth groups began coming to Camp Tyler.

During 1949 the first classes from the Tyler Schools started attending day programs. By 1951 Dr. Mortimer Brown, then superintendent of Tyler Public Schools, wanted to make sure that every fifth and sixth grader in the Tyler schools could have an outdoor learning experience. He requested a contract with SCYF for exclusive use of the facilities during the school year. In return Tyler Schools would be responsible for all maintenance and utilities. This agreement provided not only a wonderful opportunity for school children, but also a great gift to the community as Camp Tyler was able to offer services for free to other organizations when Tyler Schools were not in session. A true gift to the community!

In 1995 SCYF officially changed its name to the Camp Tyler Foundation (CTF) to more closely reflect its connection to the facility. The mission remained the same, though some of the populations had changed. In 2000, at the request of Tyler ISD, CTF began offering programs to other school districts with the goal of providing extra income to offset costs. By 2008 TISD relinquished exclusivity, and Camp Tyler staff took over instructional programs. They began referring to Camp Tyler as Camp Tyler Outdoor School (CTOS) to distinguish themselves from local recreational camps. Today CTOS continues to provide outdoor education in “the classroom without walls.”

CTOS serves private and public schools through outdoor education programs aligned with recognized educational standards, such as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). These school groups range in age from preschool through the college and university level. In addition, many different special needs, faith-based, and youth organizations utilize the facility throughout the year.

Camp facilities are available to rent for clients who may be looking for a smaller location to host their camp. CTOS is also available to rent for a variety of activities including picnics, weddings, retreats, small or large events, and family reunions.

CTOS has a strong community heritage since the late 1940s. The memories and lessons are priceless and lasting. In the spring of 2013, the Headmaster from Westlake Charter School said “You have it right! At the previous camp we attended, the thing the students remembered best was their time in the candy store. Here, what our students remember are aquatic studies, shelter building, team building, playing in the mud, and cooking on an open fire. This is how it should be done.”

It is a place where everyone can learn through the process of discovery. Experience the Magic – Visit Camp Tyler!