

Making Real Men Outdoors

Remember, fear is a controllable emotion. That's the last thing Ted Thompson, co-founder of Real Men Outdoors mentoring camps, says to a group of boys before sending them into a dense forest with only the moon's light providing visibility for the next few hours. No, this isn't punishment for the teens; it's one of the many character-building situations they'll face as part of the Orlando, ministry's program to instill godly values in developing young men.

Run by an all-volunteer staff, Real Men Outdoors is a organization that uses the "wilderness experience" to teach fundamental qualities such as responsibility and accountability, which Thompson believes are missing in many of today's youth. Citing results from a census poll taken a few years ago, Thompson says he and his co-founder Lawrence Williams were dismayed to find that 40 percent of all young men under the age of 19 in America live in homes without responsible men present.

"Rather than complain about the type of men they turn out to be, we decided to open the facility," Thompson says.

The 501(c)(3) works with a wide range of young people, but its main target is young men ages 13 to 18. Some participants are sent to the camp by resource officers, schools or churches, and are taught survival skills such as fire building, shelter construction and navigation. On the 475-acre camping ground – also home to wild turkeys, wild hogs, snakes and foxes – they must hike, canoe, fish, run a militarylike obstacle course and cook all their meals.

"This whole thing is about them learning to work as a team, about them being accountable and being able to move outside of boundaries that they thought they were locked into," Thompson says.

The camp has been so effective in building young men of character that more organizations are referring students to the program. Real Men Outdoors has grown from serving 37 youth in 2008 to a projected 250 this year. Thompson credits the growth to the biblical principles implemented in their training programs and a foundational mission based on Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go" (NKJV).

"So many young men are coming from environments where there are no older men setting examples for them," he says. "It's not what you say, it's what you do. We are an example of people deciding not to just sit back and moan and groan, but to do something concrete to make a change and bring about a positive impact."