

# INSPIRE ATLANTA

Extraordinary people and uplifting stories that bring out the best in all of us

## THE UPLIFT

# Camp announces expansion to serve more challenged youth

Camp Twin Lakes will soon welcome 3,500 more kids annually.

By Nancy Badertscher  
For the AJC

Supporters of Camp Twin Lakes see a growing need to provide an empowering camp experience to Georgia youngsters with serious illnesses, disabilities and other life challenges.

Last week, the not-for-profit with two camps within 50 miles of Atlanta announced a campaign to raise \$22.5 million for a third year-round camp.

The expansion – welcome news to emergency room pediatrician Cedric Miller and others – will allow Camp Twin Lakes to host 13,500 campers annually, up from the current 10,000, by 2023. This includes the impoverished and mentally ill, populations not previously served by the camp.

All campers receive scholarships to cover most costs, and 72% attend for free.

Miller, a member of the camp's board and CEO of a company that staffs children's emergency rooms in Atlanta and Chattanooga, Tennessee, said hospitals are seeing "kids with almost every medical and psychological challenge you can imagine."

When these youngsters are



Mei Ting enjoys swimming at Camp Courage, a Camp Twin Lakes event for children with craniofacial disorders, in partnership with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. COURTESY OF CAMP TWIN LAKES

able to attend camps, such as Camp Twin Lakes, they develop confidence, independence and friendships. They also experience challenges, such as rock-climbing and horseback riding, that they wouldn't have otherwise, Miller said.

"It's really an important part of identifying their problem and overcoming it," he said.

The new fundraising campaign, the largest in Camp Twin Lakes' 28-year history, will allow the group to create and equip its second campground in Rutledge in Morgan County, about 45 miles from Atlanta. Twin Lakes' other campground is in Winder, in suburban Barrow County.

The expansion has some early backers, including The Marcus Foundation (\$5 million), Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation (\$5 million), The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation (\$2 million) and The James M. Cox Foundation (\$1 million), named for the founder of Cox Enterprises, the parent company of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Jill Morrissey, Camp Twin Lakes' CEO, said, the expansion will allow the not-for-profit to meet the demand of existing camp partners and build new partnerships to serve new populations, including children with mental health diagnoses and those living in poverty.

"Now more than ever, we

understand the benefit of connection and community on mental health, and we will be expanding our programs to address this critical need for all campers and their families," she said.

Camp Twin Lakes provides year-round, fully adaptive, and medically supportive programs that teach campers to overcome obstacles and share their experiences with other children who face similar challenges.

The camp is looking for donations other than cash, including adaptive bikes and helmets, adaptive boats and life jackets, and arts and crafts. Medical supplies also are needed so campers can receive onsite treatment and learn to take their own medications.

Doug Hertz, chairman and founder of Camp Twin Lakes, said the camp's growth through the years from 1,000 campers to the current 10,000, was intentional and driven by the community's needs.

"We are grateful for the community who helped us get here, and we are asking for continued support as demand for our programs steadily grows," Hertz said. "There is a great need to serve more children, as well as the partners who serve with us."

To learn more about Camp Twin Lakes, go to [camptwinlakes.org](http://camptwinlakes.org).

## Another uplifting story

### Heart condition leads young Orioles fan to Yankee Stadium

A lifelong fan of the Baltimore Orioles, 11-year-old Blake Wheatley of Cambridge, Maryland, has developed a distaste for his favorite team's rivals such as the New York Yankees.

But recently, Blake and his father, Adam, and his cousin were guests of the Yankees, who invited Blake to Yankee Stadium in New York City to spend time with manager Aaron Boone, as both share a congenital heart condition.

Blake, a middle infielder and right-handed pitcher for the Mid-Atlantic Shockers, had run a lap inside an indoor tennis facility and began to stretch with his teammates during a practice Feb. 21 when he suddenly fainted. Adam Wheatley, who works for a transportation app company, said his son was motionless, sweating profusely and had a racing heartbeat.

Blake was diagnosed with a bicuspid aortic valve issue, a congenital defect.

Adam Wheatley said treatment involves some simple changes in his dietary routine. His son also cannot participate in contact sports such as football or strenuous weight training or other forms of exercise such as soccer or long-distance running.

But Blake can still play baseball. In fact, it's the safest sport for him, Adam Wheatley said, because it's not endurance.

After learning Boone also has a bicuspid aortic valve condition, Adam Wheatley reached out to the Yankees and asked if the manager could share a few encouraging words with Blake. The franchise instead invited him to the stadium. Blake tossed a baseball with Boone and former Orioles pitcher Zack Britton.

"I was just proud to be there and have fun," Blake said.

— BALTIMORE SUN

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