

# Camp

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tor Cindy Robertson said.

The new building will improve conditions for the nurses on staff, who work there 24/7 and sleep in the back, as well as improve overall conditions for campers and staff, she said.

"A new health center will help registration function more efficiently," Robertson said. "There will be an isolation room and a small kitchen."

It will also be ADA friendly and provide a central storage area for records.

All of the buildings have been redone, except for the health center, Tighe said.

The goal is to knock the building down in October and have it ready for next spring, he said.

## The camp

Situated off bustling Routes 1 and 27 on 13 acres in the wooded setting of Roosevelt Park, the nonprofit Kiddie Keep Well Camp, founded in 1924, is an oasis away from home for Middlesex County youngsters who would not otherwise be able to attend a summer camp.

Each summer, the camp accepts about 680 children, ages 7 to 15, from a pool of about 1,000 applicants.

The camp receives referrals from various sources, including school nurses, guidance counselors, principals and the New Jersey Department of Youth and Family Services.

Accredited by the American Camp Association and licensed by the state Department of Health, the camp includes nine cabins, two pools, an administrative building, a learning center, a library and health center.

The camp offers four 11-day sessions at no cost to the families. Each child receives a free physical and dental screening, as well as dental care if needed. Campers also receive three nutritious meals a day and healthy snacks.

Campers participate in such fun activities as swimming, arts and crafts, music, dance and drama, as well as a health and nutrition class, a literacy program and fitness. There's also a campfire with singing and s'mores.

"This year, we are bringing in karate and yoga," Robertson said.

The Middlesex County Sheriff's Office presents lessons on bullying and cyberbullying, and once a year, U.S. Marines with the Toys for Tots program host a barbecue for the campers.

Robertson, who took over as executive director 12 years ago, said the camp "is going through a lot of physical changes and has grown tremendously."

The camp has gone from 125 campers per session to 165 per session, she said, adding that it's not unusual to take in an additional child during a crisis situation.

In addition, a counselor-in-training program has been added, grooming campers for counselor positions.

Robertson noticed there was a gap when kids aged out at 13. She looked for a way to keep them engaged so they can become part of the camp's future staff.

With funding from the Woodbridge Community Development Block Grant Program and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the program was initiated.

"This year, we have 22 staff members who were previous campers," she said.

## The counselors

Crystal Owens, 19, of Carteret, is a former camper who has been a counselor since 2012.



SUSAN LOYER/STAFF PHOTO

Tom Tighe (left), president of the Camp Kiddie Keep Well Board of Directors, reviews paperwork with Ronald Goldfarb, board secretary, in the current Health Center. The board is spearheading a drive to replace that building.

"I've been going here since I was 6," she said. "My first year here I was really bad and really didn't want to be here."

She said at one point she was being sent home because she kept crying. Her mom said she would pick her up in two days.

Her mother arrived on the third day to bring her home, but by then, Owens was crying because she didn't want to leave.

"I loved it," she said. "It feels like home to me. It became part of my life. I told Cindy when the camp is old and like nobody wants it, I'm going to buy it. I want to keep this camp going because I love it so much."

Owens said her career goal is to become a pediatrician.

"The camp helped me find my way and what I want to do and what career I want to be in," she said.

For Carmel Coleman, 16, of Metuchen, who is serving her first year as a junior counselor, the camp helped her through some difficult times.

When Coleman's mom was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, she was signed up for the four-session gateway program.

"They treated me like family," Coleman said. "They helped me get through some struggling times."

Robert Cody, 18, of New Brunswick, returned to the camp this year as a counselor. Cody, who has secured a dream job in fashion at Vogue in Los Angeles, took time off from his job to come back to the camp.

"I told Vogue that during the summers, I'm part of this really awesome camp back in New Jersey where I am from and this place has been my family ever since," he said. "I can't be away from here. Being here and being around people who want to do amazing things and give back to the community has really helped me just come to terms with who I am, what I want to be when I'm older or what I'm striving to be now."

Cody hopes to someday open a nonprofit design school for children, an idea he got from working at the camp, he said. Camp officials said they have support from county municipalities, the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The camp also receives help from local Girl Scout and Boy Scout groups.

Kiddie Keep Well Camp also provides a respite for Middlesex County senior citizens.

Donations earmarked for the new health center may be sent to Kiddie Keep Well Camp Building Foundation, 35 Roosevelt Drive, Edison, NJ 08837-2333. Checks should be made payable to KKWC Building Fund.

Additional information is available at [www.kiddiekeepwell.org](http://www.kiddiekeepwell.org), calling 732-548-6542 or emailing [info@kiddiekeepwell.org](mailto:info@kiddiekeepwell.org).

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