



TAKING S.T.E.P.S. NEWSLETTER

YMCA CAMP NORTHERN LIGHTS | FALL 2023

A LETTER TO OUR COMMUNITY

The goal of the Taking S.T.E.P.S Initiative is to thoughtfully create more opportunities for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ families to experience representation and community in a family camp setting. We are focusing on making tangible, lasting change that will grow year to year.

We think its important to acknowledge and celebrate that this initiative is now going into its 4th year! The S.T.E.P.S. community at Camp Northern Lights has created incredible opportunities in ways we couldn't have imagined.

Just like any other community, we have done our best to address challenges and celebrate our successes. Taking S.T.E.P.S. was created with the help of many community members and outside resources. That sentiment holds true to this day as our community of families, volunteers, and staff help guide our equity work in authentic ways. We will continue to listen, learn, and grow along the way.

Thank you for being a part of the community and sharing in the journey.



Summer 2023

2023 HIGHLIGHTS

- The Taking S.T.E.P.S. Program celebrated its third summer, again offering 4 S.T.E.P.S. Sessions
- 306 people were served through S.T.E.P.S. this summer
- 48 families were served through S.T.E.P.S. this summer: 24 returning and 24 new
- 5 Leadership Development Program participants aged 14-18 volunteered at camp through S.T.E.P.S.
- Secured funding from 283 individual donors and two Minnesota foundations to financially sustain S.T.E.P.S.
- 8 former S.T.E.P.S. families registered and attended camp this summer via the general lottery
- Successfully piloted S.T.E.P.S. lottery to allow for a more equitable registration process
- Hosted North Hennepin Community College's – 'Nature Immersion & Environmental Justice' course – for the second year through a partnership with a S.T.E.P.S. family



Summer 2023

SUMMER 2024 REGISTRATION UPDATES & TIMELINE

S.T.E.P.S. LOTTERY REGISTRATION

- Registration for S.T.E.P.S. begins with a lottery process, giving all families an equal opportunity. Online registration for the lottery is free of cost.
- Each family will register as a household. When a household registers for the lottery, they are randomly assigned to a registration wave. Wave assignments will be sent one week prior to the lottery.
- Families interested in being a part of the general Family Camp Lottery can also learn more [here](#). The deadline to register for the general Family Camp Lottery is November 22, 2023.
- We are excited to announce that our sister camp, Camp du Nord, is adding taking S.T.E.P.S. for the first time this coming summer! June 30 – July 6 will be the session dates in which 50% or more of their cabins/sites will be reserved for BIPOC identifying families. More details to come soon.



Summer 2023



Summer 2023

IMPORTANT DATES

Lottery Dates

- S.T.E.P.S. Lottery Registration Open
 - January 8 – 29, 2024
- S.T.E.P.S. Lottery Dates
 - February 21 – 22, 2024

Summer 2024 S.T.E.P.S. Session Dates

- 6-Night sessions (Sunday to Saturday)
 - Session 3: June 23 – June 29 (BIPOC)
 - Session 8: July 21 – 27 (LGBTQ+)
 - Session 10: August 4 – 10 (BIPOC)
- 3-Night sessions
 - Session 6: July 10 – 13 (Wednesday – Saturday) (BIPOC)

Leadership Development Program (LDP)

- LDP Applications due November 24th, 2023. Learn more [here](#)

“For me the Taking S.T.E.P.S program means that we all belong to one family. A family which shares not only their stay, but also their culture, their songs, their food, their kindness. A family that cares for each other, to make them feel that they belong, without fear of being pointed out or judged for their economic situation or skin color.” – S.T.E.P.S. Participant

RECENT AND REMARKABLE



WINTER S.T.E.P.S. RETREAT

We've been listening to our community and have heard the need for more equity-inspired programs. We have now taken action based on that feedback and are excited to pilot our first ever S.T.E.P.S. Winter Retreat! It's bittersweet news to share that registration for this program filled within 30 minutes! We are excited to experience this program for the first time this coming December and can't wait to make this an annual tradition.

TOFTE LAKE CENTER PARTNERSHIP

This summer, we hosted four artists from the Tofte Lake Center, an artist retreat center north of Camp, and they each put on a workshop with campers during a S.T.E.P.S. Session. Pictured here, Dawn shares Suminagashi, Japanese paper marbling, with CNL campers. The focus of this partnership is to connect BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists with the S.T.E.P.S. community at camp.



4TH ANNUAL S.T.E.P.S. RUN/WALK

On August 12th, Camp Northern Lights summer staff, leadership development program participants, and Aang the dog completed a 6k run/walk around the Trezona Trail in Ely, MN to raise awareness of the Taking S.T.E.P.S. Initiative in the Ely community. Miles, Bergen, and Jake seized the day and made it a half marathon!

FAMILY SPOTLIGHT

Meghan and her two kids have been S.T.E.P.S. campers at Camp Northern Lights for two summers, 2022 and 2023. This fall, we asked Meghan if she would be willing to share about her family's camp story.

When and how did you first hear about camp?

Meghan: I heard about camp over two years ago from a good friend who participated in a prior year STEPS week and had an incredible experience which prompted me to research more. I didn't grow up camping or even cabin-ing, so I was so excited at the prospect of bringing my kids to the great outdoors and giving them the opportunity to grow up "going to camp".

How would you describe your comfort level of being outdoors, both at camp and back home?

Meghan: As I mentioned, I did not grow up in the outdoors AT ALL. My first and only experience camping as a kid was at Girlscout Camp as a nine year old. During COVID, I decided on a whim to head to REI, rent all the things they told me to, and head North. I spent a weekend in the Boundary Waters solo (go big...) and caught the bug that weekend. I feel a lot of peace and re-centering in nature and wanted to experience that in community and with my kiddos. I have an adventurous spirit, but a lot less experience than many. STEPS and CNL made camp accessible for my family and I. It also really felt like I could show up without much "planned" and have that taken care of for me with little to no effort.

What were your initial impressions of camp (upon arriving, first gathering, age groups, etc.)?

Meghan: At first, I was intimidated by the "experience". There was so much unknown, but within hours, I had the resource family at my door welcoming us to camp, the staff making sure we had everything we needed, and the excitement was palpable and catchy. As a single parent, age groups were a DREAM COME TRUE! Accessibility to experiences like family camp could feel daunting for someone doing it solo, but the community feel of camp and the relationships my kiddos forged right off the bat made it feel like an extension of home quickly.



"The S.T.E.P.S. Initiative made it possible that our kids weren't self conscious of being the only black kids at camp - this, in and of itself, made the camp experience feel inclusive"

- S.T.E.P.S. Participant

FAMILY SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED

What surprised you the most about camp?

Meghan: I was most surprised by the number of families who may be my "neighbors" back in Minneapolis that I got to meet at camp. Building those relationships in such a meaningful way at camp made it feel like we could continue those at home. I also felt immediately like I belonged at camp because I was able to see families like mine experiencing camp in a similar way.

What is an image, word, or phrase that describes your experience at Camp Northern Lights during S.T.E.P.S.?

Meghan: Life at its best. I feel the most at peace, the most respected and cared for, the most present and in the moment when I am at camp. I love seeing my kids adventure and laugh and make friends and then cry together at closing ceremony when the week is over. I feel like my best self when I am at camp and I try to bring that home with me.

What would you tell a family that is brand new to camping about the S.T.E.P.S. experience?

Meghan: STEPS was created to help families who might not traditionally feel comfortable at family camp or in the woods or surrounded by strangers (soon to be friends) feel right at home. So come with a knowing that you'll be safe, you'll be celebrated and you'll be respected at camp, all with a centering on community building and fun. I've made some incredible friends at camp, people who I never would have met without this experience. Expect to be moved by how special STEPS is.

