

SPOTLIGHT

Reaching new heights: Camp Pillsbury elevates self-confidence

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Session four of Camp Pillsbury wrapped up Sunday with a performance day. Campers showed off their new skills — including tap dancing, rock band performances, and trapeze stunts — that they were able to master in two short weeks. (Photos by Annie Granlund, People's Press)

OWATONNA — Since 2014, children from all over the globe have been flocking to the small town of Owatonna to learn what exactly they are made of.

Whether they hail from Egypt, China, Turkey, France, Mexico, or just around the corner, the campers at Camp Pillsbury all have one thing in common: they leave with the self-confidence they never knew they had.

A group of campers showed off their new-found confidence on Sunday, during one of the final performance days of the season. From rock bands to circus acts, the audience's cheers rang through the town as they witnessed what the kids accomplished in two short weeks.

"It's scary just climbing the ladder," said founder and executive director Vonda White in reference to the ten campers who defied all odds and conquered the trapeze. "I've done it, reaching out to the bar and swinging and letting go. It's scary. But when you do scary things and stretch yourself, it makes you think, 'What else can I do?'"

White's mission for Camp Pillsbury has been the same since day one: to ensure that every camper has the opportunity to grow and become the best person that he or she can be. With that vision in mind, she has set out to make Pillsbury the premier performing arts summer camp in America, with programs led by professionals in the entertainment industry.

"I had a set of parents come up to me on Sunday and comment on how the transformation of not only their child but the campus keeps improving every year," White said. "Camp is growing and our numbers are improving."

White said that 2018 is shaping up to be a record-breaking year, with every session having up to 20 additional campers signed up compared to the year prior. Though White takes pride in the number of new campers growing, it's the campers who return year after year that touch her heart.

"Some parents told me that their daughter works the whole year to be able to get here, that's it her whole goal for the year, which is the case with a lot of campers," she explained. "It does get in their blood. Camp is a big part of their lives and it helps them." "We want them to be their best selves," White continued, to try new things and strive to be a role model for others."

As Camp Pillsbury continues to grow, White continues to look into the future on how they can best serve the greatest number of kids. Currently, she is in talk with Riverland Community College to expand the current ESL program. White said they currently get about 35 international students who do ESL, or English as a Second Language, for about two to three hours a day. The potential new program would allow the campers to have access to a full-time ESL program, while still "incorporating the fun in the evening" in typical Pillsbury style.

Camp Pillsbury campers will have two final performances that are open to the public. They will perform on Friday, Aug. 17, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Village of Yesteryear during the Steele County Free Fair and again on Sunday, Aug. 20, on the Camp Pillsbury campus beginning at 10 a.m.

"They do well when they hear all the applause, it gives them the confidence to try new things, do new things, and fall in love with it," White said. "It's a very encouraging environment."