MY FIRST EXPERIENCE AT KEY LEADER

Carol Abadie – Michigan Key Leader Chair

It all started in January 2017, when I was asked by Marian O’Higgins, Governor-Elect for Michigan District, if I would be interested in replacing her as chair for Michigan District Key Leader. To be totally honest, I really did not know what Key Leader was all about. I knew it involved a camp weekend with teenagers.

My first step was to attend a Key Leader training session which was held in Indianapolis, with all the wonderful Kiwanis Key Leader Chairs and volunteers. They came from all over the United States, including Hawaii, and a couple were from Canada. I met some great people. After attending the training I was excited about Key Leader, but still was not sure what exactly took place. I found myself asking how can one weekend really change a young person’s life, as they were all telling me.

The weekend of April 28th – 30th, the Michigan District Key Leader Camp was held at Faholo Conference Center in Grass Lake, Michigan. This would be my very first Key Leader experience. Well, I must tell you, I was totally blown away. I wish all of you could experience a Key Leader weekend.

It truly does take a village... First, I must thank my Village of volunteers, Dee Hudson, our Governor and our mailbox photographer. Marian O’Higgins, Governor-Elect and my true mentor. Without Marian’s guidance, I’m sure it would not have been the huge success that it was. Gloria Smart, who is our Key Leader Coordinator, who was always the calm within the storm. Preston Abadie, my husband and our IT person, videographer and photographer, always there to catch the shot, and get a smile. Tom Wilson, who was our go to person. David Tran, Key Club Ambassador, and Linda-Ann Heldt who worked tirelessly to promote and recruit to fill our camp with 67 students. Linda-Ann also put together a great presentation of the entire weekend in time to show to the parents on Sunday. Lori Litz, our registration person, who made sense and organized the neighborhoods. She was always there with an encouraging smile. Sarah Kew, our Initiatives Course Advisor. She did the trust fall which showed the kids that she walks the talk. Rebecca Brinker, our Dorm advisor, always there to help and our smores queen. Kelly Dougherty, her first year at Key Leader, was able to chip in and become a true asset to the success of the camp. Robert Allen, our audio man and Dodge Ball Champ. Anthony Otto who was our Gym and Dorm advisor. Our Key Leader Facilitator, Greg Long, the knowledge and growth he delivered to the future leaders was phenomenal! What a GREAT team I had! They were all truly top notch!

The actual Key Leader program, is so amazing. I watched these kids come in from all over the state. On Friday, they looked a little apprehensive and reluctant, and some weren’t really making eye contact. Most of them didn’t know anybody there. Some belonged to a Key Club and some did not. They were very quiet and reserved. By Saturday morning, a true transformation had taken place. They were all laughing, they were engaged, they were eager to share their thoughts and present their ideas to the group. I was totally blown away. Some of the exercises that took place at Key Leader were so thought provoking and challenging. Greg
Long, our head facilitator was able to reach these kids and really get them engaged with this program. It was an amazing learning experience. They all had fun, and they learned some of the key tenets of Service Leadership – Integrity, Growth, Respect, Community, and Excellence. There were so many invaluable activities, including lectures, breakout sessions, the initiatives course, free time, a camp fire with smores, and even a dance party that was totally lit. Tom Wilson, secured us a great speaker, her name was Emily Sherrard. She is a professional triathlete. She brought all her awards and medals for the kids to see. She spoke to them about her trials and how she overcame some major obstacles in her life and how nobody would believe that she would be able to achieve all that she had.

The entire weekend experience was moving and inspirational. I was humbled to be part of such an invaluable, rewarding program. The energy was immeasurable! Additionally, I am so proud of all the Kiwanis Clubs that sponsored a student. You have many reasons to be proud of that student! You made an investment in a young adult that will yield significant returns for years to come. This is the best investment you can make, improving their future and our communities.

There were so many positive and encouraging comments. They all had nothing but great things to say about their experience. We had three students who couldn’t wait to go back home and try and get a key club started in their high schools. We had students already wanting to come back next year as a student facilitator. We had parents who witnessed a positive change in their kids. I had a parent tell me that this is not the same kid that she dropped off. A parent asked if we had a Key Leader Camp in the summer so that they could send their son. They all loved the fact that they made so many friends. And the memories that they will take on their life’s journey are priceless!