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Building Children's Characters Over the Long Haul

The Fiver Children's Foundation, a youth nonprofit, makes a 10-year commitment to the children it works with, starting when they are 8



Fishing at Camp Fiver. PHOTO: CAMP FIVER

By **RALPH GARDNER JR.**

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When Fatima O'Connor got into a rare fight with her twin sister while they were working on college applications, she didn't seek solace in her family or friends. Instead, she boarded the subway to Manhattan from her home in Brooklyn.

"I ran to the Fiver office," the now 27-year-old Ms. O'Connor recalled. "They helped me figure out why I was acting like that. My sister and I were just stressed."

"Fiver" is the Fiver Children's Foundation, a local youth nonprofit that takes its name from a visionary rabbit in the novel "Watership Down."

It makes a 10-year commitment to each child it works with, starting when he or she is 8 years old and continuing through high school. That commitment involves year-round programs and a two-week summer camp in upstate New York.

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Fiver focuses not on grades and test scores but on character development—hence the use of a wizened rabbit with extraordinary interpersonal skills as a mascot. The group seeks out average students who might struggle in school.

"Once kids feel they belong to something, they let their guard down," said Christie Ko, Fiver's executive director. "If they think you're going to be there for them long-term, they can make mistakes. We're not going to give up on them."

Fiver serves about 500 children a year. Those children must be recommended by community organizations, and their families must qualify for New York City's free and reduced school-lunch program.

The organization was started in 1998 by Thomas Tucker, a former Lehman Brothers executive and "Watership Down" fan. The book's British author, Richard Adams,

attended the camp's opening ceremony in 2000.

Sitting in his bare-bones Fiver office on Eighth Avenue, Mr. Tucker recalled Mr. Adams at the event saying, "This is not something a Brit would do. We're not too philanthropic."

According to Mr. Tucker, the vast majority of Fiver's alumni go to college, many of them as the first person in their family to attend.



From left, Fiver alumni Jonathan Jean-Pierre, Fatima O'Connor and Gabriela Berroa with a map of the foundation's camp in upstate New York. PHOTO: RALPH GARDNER JR./THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

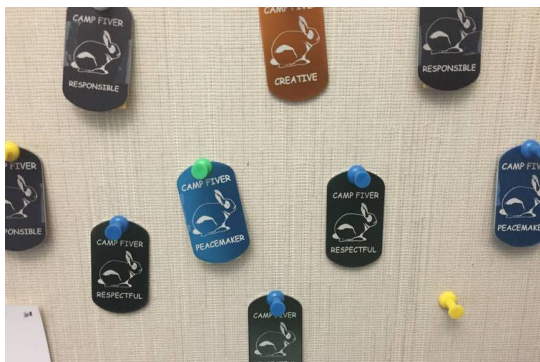
"I would not have applied to Colgate if not for Tom," said Gabriela Berroa, a 22-year-old Fiver alumna who is now a sales coordinator at Univision. She was referring to Colgate University, Mr. Tucker's alma mater. "He said, 'So you're applying to Colgate, right?'"

Jonathan Jean-Pierre, a 23-year-old Fiver alum, doubts he would be at J.P. Morgan Chase, where he works as a human-resources analyst, were it not for the organization. "We didn't have the proper schooling, mentors, to look up to," said Mr. Jean-Pierre, who grew up in Brooklyn's Sunset Park area.

Referring to Fiver, he added, "Whatever your academic skills, they help you achieve whatever you're good at. They help you define it yourself. There's no benchmarks."

The camp gives out rabbit-embossed dog tags, sort of like Boy Scout merit badges, but in categories such as "creative," "respectful," "peacemaker" and "responsible" rather than bird study and bugling.

Mr. Jean-Pierre admitted he wasn't thrilled when he drew "learning" during his first year at camp, though he quickly came to appreciate the value of an open mind.



The camp gives out rabbit-embossed, motivational dog tags in categories such as 'creative' and 'responsible.' PHOTO: RALPH GARDNER JR./THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"You always have to learn and be inquisitive," he said. "I use that every single day."

Despite 10 years of summer camp, Ms. O'Connor remains a city kid at heart.

"I don't necessarily love the creek," she said when Mr. Jean-Pierre brought it up fondly. "There were leeches there."

Fishing wasn't her thing, either, Ms. O'Connor said. "I still don't like worms. I spent a lot of time with the horses."

However, a five-day canoe trip turned out to be transformative. "I felt I couldn't do it, and I did it," she said. "I felt invincible."

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