

ACTING DIRECTOR OF OUTDOOR MINISTRY 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

When applying for the Acting Director of Outdoor Ministry position in January 2021, I was asked to write a one-page summary of my theology of outdoor ministry. It became a running joke in my home, “Has any Vanderbilt Divinity School graduate ever successfully written a theological summary in JUST one page?!?” Ask me to write a 20-page theological paper on communion, or Scripture, or the work of the Holy Spirit and I could deliver it by the end of next week, but this task felt daunting. It felt daunting because I recognized what I was being asked was not only a theological summary of what outdoor ministry is to me, but rather, I was being asked to cast a vision for a community with whom I had not yet interacted.



True to my experience of God’s humor, those words I wrote in January now embody the Spirit I encountered this summer at DuBois Center: “The world ‘outside’ of our comfort zone, our churches, and in nature, allow us space to become, reconnect with God, and listen within our own spirits. Outdoor ministry within the UCC is an extension of our church’s radical welcome, a way that those who will never step foot into our church buildings experience God’s love.” Thank you, Thank you, Thank you for giving me the opportunity to not only experience this for myself, but for trusting me to extend this welcome to others.

At DuBois Center this summer, we had over 400 guests between DuBois Center camps and community partners. We served around 90 meals, hosted approximately 120 horseback rides. We welcomed community partners from Hoyleton, the Girl Scouts, and The Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. We welcomed more than 40 people to Rainbow Camp, and we will continue to make this a space where everyone is welcome and safe. We were able to accomplish this feat thanks to the incredible ministry of our summer staff. What many don’t understand about our summer staff this year is that we were incredibly short staffed – in a program that would usually have 12-15 paid counselors, we were operating with eight. In a program that would traditionally have five or six coordinators, we were operating with three at the start of summer. Each summer staff member was doing the work of two or three people, with a new director. I liken our summer to a superhero movie: while at the penultimate moment it seems like the hero is losing, we all know the ultimate ending is that the hero wins. I am happy to say that at the end of our summer, it felt like we won. This could not have happened without our staff and the numerous volunteers who stepped in to help along the way. Thank you!

While I love interpreting data, the story of what happened this summer cannot be defined by the numbers. The story is told in the fact that over 400 guests had a “near normal” few days experiencing God, nature, and community in a time when “near normal” days are rare. Even when it was hard, it was a blessing to be part of something so special.

This fall, we welcomed Rylee Hodges-Stone as our new program director for DuBois Center. Rylee will be in charge of planning and implementing our year-round programs. Rylee had been a long-time camper at DuBois Center and, at the start of summer, was one of the heroes who stepped up to pull off our summer programming. In many of our camper evaluations, Rylee’s name was the one mentioned as the team member who impacted our campers the most. Her vision and skills are unparalleled, and I believe we will see the benefit of her work among us for many years to come.

When I talk about DuBois Center’s future, I get excited. In a time of so much bad news, we are a space that offers incredibly good news to all: that they are welcome to connect with the Holy, however defined, in this joyful, life-giving place. I look forward to what God has in store for our ministry together and hope you will continue to support the efforts of our small but mighty camp!

Hayley Elliott, Acting Director of Outdoor Ministry.