



Extreme Makeover

A couple who started a camp afresh takes the ministry another step



A year ago, Stan and Valeri Walker were excited about Hartstone Bible Camp. Under their leadership, the flailing Potter Valley, California, ministry got a fresh start in almost every aspect of the organization: property, facilities, programs, volunteers, staff,

finances, and marketing. The Walkers used their own expertise and soaked up industry knowledge to radically shift the direction of the camp.

Today, it's not only the camp that's changed direction. The Walkers have, as well. What began as a busy weekend project that ignited great enthusiasm

has turned into a full-fledged career backed by passion.

"We know that we are definitely going to be in full-time ministry at Hartstone Bible Camp," Stan says. "There is no doubt in our minds as a couple about where we're called to serve."

Getting Personal

This recent realization has profound implications for Stan and Valeri and their family. At one point, they told their church that they would never consider moving to the camp; now they hope to be living at the camp by this summer. This means likely putting their home and the contracting business Stan owns up for sale.

Stan expected to sell the company to a family member with whom he'd worked for 20 years, but that situation unraveled. While there is some interest from others in purchasing the business, it is a path of faith for the Walkers—one they're determined to pursue.

"We just felt God would provide if we moved to Hartstone, and we're going to walk in faith," Stan says. "God's in control and we believe that he will totally and absolutely provide."

Other difficulties have met them along the pathway, as well.

"It's exciting to be faithful for the Lord, and yet it's challenging when people are questioning and saying, 'You're doing what?'" Stan says.

Stronger Bonds

When the Walkers initially began working with the camp as volunteer directors, they made dramatic changes—and not without challenges—clearing out loads of garbage, repairing cabins, improving signage, and many other needed tasks. While the couple says there's still much to be done, they have seen some significant results of their dedication.

"The Walkers have really been a huge encouragement to us in their organizational skills and vision," says Martin Blanton, pastor of Vacaville Bible Church in Vacaville, California. Martin and his church have been coming to the camp since 1976, and he's seen it in a variety of conditions during that time. "They've upgraded the quality of the facilities and the food."

Martin says the service has also jumped up a notch. He was impressed with the Walkers' follow-up, care, and

concern after a young boy with the church group had a swimming accident on the property. "The people really have a servant's spirit."

It's not just parishioners at Vacaville Bible Church who have appreciated the change. Guest groups—the camp runs no programs of its own—increased enough to double attendance from 2005 to 2006. Networking with CCCA camping leaders and using association resources helped the Walkers incorporate fresh ideas into the camp's operations and polish its website. In addition, a new Hartstone DVD encouraged people to come back to the property and see the dramatic changes.

"The community is beginning to view Hartstone and the ministry in a new light," Stan says.

These improved relationships have boosted not only the camp's reputation, but also its facilities.

"We've worked really hard at building trust with our neighbors," Valeri says, adding that water issues had been problematic a year ago. The situation turned around when a new neighbor became president of the local users association for the water. With neither him nor the Walkers having a history among area folks, solutions were born, and communication and cooperation took a forward step. "We have a great relationship with him. It's really great how the Lord brings along new people."

Focused Mission

The most visible change the Walkers have made is with the facilities. While they're still trying to catch up on a long list of maintenance jobs that were deferred over the years, they have goals in mind in the form of one-, three-, five-, and ten-year plans.

"We really want to design the facility with a family atmosphere, and not compete with extreme games and all those things," Valeri says.

According to Martin, they've done just that.

"With all of the advances and upgrades, it still hasn't lost its unique

quality of hominess," the pastor says. "It still carries its rustic ambience without the rustic qualities of low-grade service and that sort of thing."

This is in line with the Hartstone mission: strengthening traditional family values and enhancing church unity by providing a natural environment where the work of the Holy Spirit will change lives for the glory of God. As it did a year ago, the camp provides traditional

recreation options, such as fishing, tubing down the river, and playing board games, which the Walkers believe draw families together.

"We don't want any age barriers. We want everyone to be able to do just about everything," Valeri says. "It doesn't have to be this extravagant thing that gets them there. You can see...the joy on their faces when they're playing these [traditional] games."

While the couple has a firm purpose, they believe it also allows for flexibility among groups that visit, so that churches can truly minister to their own people and create connections within their congregations.

"We provide the facility and the food, and they can personalize the program for their own people," Valeri says. "One [type of church] will come, and they have no schedule...they do whatever they want; they do it spontaneously. Other churches come and bring their full choir and do their church services outside twice a day; they're a little more formal. The neat thing is that they can do what they want."

Some churches just come for a vacation. At first, Stan and Valeri were hesitant to use that word. But they realized that's exactly what some families need—an affordable vacation during which moms, dads, and kids can grow closer together. Besides, the couple says, kids aren't as likely to get excited about a "retreat."

Valuable Volunteers

With its unique family-focused atmosphere, the camp has provided the opportunity for another ministry—to teenage

by Alison Phillips

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helpers. The only paid staff members are two cooks, and former campers and others have stepped up to be volunteers.

The first year, the Walkers ran a volunteer program out of necessity, but then realized how much the youth, most 16 to 19 years old, were being affected as they learned about teamwork and formed new relationships. Families and couples join the teens on volunteer teams, providing good examples for the young people.

"I see these kids come up there and relax and there's no peer pressure," Valeri says. "It's the same kids, but a different environment."

Plenty of volunteers also allow the directors more time to get to know the groups and their likes and dislikes about the ministry, learning how they can improve the experience for guests. The first summer, the Walkers felt that they needed to be involved in everything. Now, with enough volunteers in roles such as camp host, they have more time to do their jobs. And volunteers who

aren't needed to help out with the current program work on projects such as landscaping and maintenance so those tasks aren't left for the end of the season.

For the Future

The Walkers have also influenced a great deal behind the scenes, including strengthening the administrative structure. They've added board members for a total of five, with two more currently in the interview process. They've also pulled the camp from being several thousand in debt to having money to consistently pay bills and funds to use for improvements.

At the end of the summer of 2006, the camp had twice the funds that it had the year prior. Much of that increase was because of unsolicited donations.

"We just do what we do, and people say, 'Here's a check' when they leave," Valeri says, adding that others who attended the camp as a child occasionally stop by the property and donate.

To obtain more funds, an individual

involved with the camp is planning to write grants for their future projects. In the plans for the grant money are family-style cabins that sleep eight to ten people and include a restroom; current cabins have no toilet facilities. With new buildings, Stan and Valeri hope to host winter retreats that they currently can't offer. And eventually, they would like to double the camp's occupancy.

Martin says he is grateful for the Walkers' leadership in the multiple camp improvements they've already made.

"I would recommend it highly, even to people who have gone to [nicer, pricier] camps," Martin says. "It would not be possible for them to go to Hartstone and come away disappointed." ■



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