



trip

EPIC FAIL

Summer Trip Disaster Stories

Few things have greater leverage for spiritual growth in the lives of your teenagers than summer trips—and that's just why they're a magnet for disaster. Embedded in these EpicFail stories are profound lessons on effective youth ministry. Summer trips are the lifeblood of a thriving youth ministry. And, also, they're magnets for disaster. For veteran youth workers, this last statement is both undeniable and...not as terrible as it sounds at first blush.

The truth is, these summer-trip disasters—some the result of poor decisions or mistakes, and some the result of forces we can't control—are often the raw material God uses to craft something really beautiful in teenagers' lives. That's another way of saying something we all know is true: Trip disasters form the stuff of lasting memories, and often have profound life-change locked up in them.

And so, we asked a wide swath of longtime youth leaders to tell us their summer-trip disaster stories, and to use the benefit of hindsight to pick out the beauty in their ugly.

AN ARMED ROBBERY ON OUR 'URBAN PLUNGE'

by Brent Lacy

One summer, I took a group of teenagers from the church where I was serving to a missions experience that I had planned in East St. Louis, Illinois. Yes, I took a bunch of white, spoiled, suburban kids to the poorest ZIP code in the U.S. I wanted to expose them to the same city where I'd first been bitten by the "missions bug." Before we left I took them through training to help them understand cultural differences and how to stay safe. The kids "mostly" realized the seriousness of the training. Some were going on the trip only because their parents forced them to go.

We arrived at our host church in a small town about 20 minutes from St. Louis and unpacked. The plan was to rest for a day, then head to our service site the day after. After we got settled, I took the kids to a Jack In the Box in south St. Louis. While we were eating, there was an attempted robbery at the drive-through window. One of my students saw the gun before the man got to the window, or it would've been a very bad night. Parents and my students were a bit shaken at this point.

The next night, we went to a White Castle for supper. While we were eating the security system malfunctioned, and cops swarmed the place. Now my students were in a full panic—if this was the "preamble" to our service experience, what would happen when we actually got on-site the next day? But we dived into our role, leading a Backyard Bible Club at the Christian Activity Center in East St. Louis (cacesl.org). The first afternoon, a fight broke out between two neighborhood kids on the basketball court, and the place went into full

lockdown for the first time in several years. Now my students were beyond panic—their suburban bubble had officially burst.

Well, the rest of the week went smoothly, but I came home with a vicious case of poison ivy from some property cleanup, and everyone had stories to tell. I learned that no matter how hard you try, you simply can't prepare for the unpredictable and the unbelievable—just do the best that you can to make sure everyone is safe. And no matter how bad you think the trip went, God can still use it as the raw material for something life-changing. One of my students who was a reluctant participant (and that's being kind) is now serving full-time as a missionary in Baja Mexico because he caught the "missions bug" while on that trip.

RANDOM ACTS OF SURVIVOR

by Jeremiah Isley

We decided to plan a Survivor theme for our summer retreat, so we divided our teenagers into two different tribes, held contests, and kept a running score throughout the extended weekend. We also came up with the "great idea" to hand out points for good deeds and random acts of kindness that were noticed by the adult leaders throughout the weekend. We did this in an effort to make the weekend immersive, and all-encompassing. Well, all we really did was cause a train wreck. All that stuff in the Bible about NOT causing division? Well, that one little decision blew all that up.

We endured everything from raging attitudes to false public righteousness to "whatever" on that trip. It seemed like such a good idea to create a weekend that shined a light on good deeds, but the lesson we learned was that you can't pressure teenagers (or anyone for that matter) into loving and caring for one another with a rigid point system. Ultimately, we encourage others to offer love and grace by first extending it to them. "We love because He first loved us"—not because we want our tribe to score points!

WE WENT TO CAMP AND A HURRICANE BROKE OUT

by Wayne Yeager

In my first year of ministry, I wanted to make a splash with my new group of students. For years, they had always attended the same summer camp, so I decided to go in a different direction. With much pomp and circumstance, I picked Panama City Beach for camp.

I got the desired effect.

My students were excited. Registration numbers shot up. The anticipation was palpable as we began planning for our week-long trip to the beach later that summer. When we finally hopped on the bus for our 14-hour drive to the camp, a hurricane was developing in the Gulf of Mexico. It never made it ashore, but it didn't have to. The violent force of the storm churned the ocean for hundreds of miles and made the beach dangerous. Surf was up, and the undertow was deadly. Law enforcement officials closed the beach all week. Succeeding waves of storms threatened the area with tornados and lethal lightning strikes. Camp officials moved almost all activities indoors for the duration of our stay.

All those students excited for a week on the beach were now bitterly disappointed, confined all day long to dorm rooms. Little disputes blew up into major drama. Parents were called. Mutiny began. Upon our return surprise parent meetings were organized—no one seemed to care that every student came home safe and unharmed in a town that had rescue helicopters buzzing overhead all day long.

In the wake of this disaster, I learned not to sell students on the idea of a vacation instead of an encounter with Christ. Our students were so focused on surf and sand that they missed the movement of God taking place around them. All they could think of was all the “fun” they weren't having. Now I sell camp as part of their spiritual journey and emphasize growing in our relationship with Christ over fun. And I pick a place nowhere near an ocean.

THE BROTHER FROM OUTER SPACE

by Liz Simmonds

I was a new youth worker taking students on my first missions trip as a leader. I had plenty of students and adult female volunteers signed up, but I still needed an adult male volunteer. The trip was almost on top of us, and desperation got the best of me. A parent said that her brother would “be a great addition to the team because he's been on lots of mission trips as a 'pastor's kid.' ” I trusted this woman, so I agreed to take a male leader on the trip that I'd never met. Mistake #1.

On the day of the trip, this man was 30 minutes late for departure because he “couldn't leave before his bartending shift was over.” I should've left without him. Mistake #2. Once on-site, I stumbled upon him smoking outside our housing area. Instead of asking him to refrain from smoking on the trip (no matter how deep into his nicotine addiction he was), I told him he was not allowed to smoke in front of my students and certainly needed to use some breath mints! Mistake #3.

By the second day of our trip it was clear that this man actually disliked junior high students, shied away from serving others, and had a general aversion to kindness. I should have bought him a one-way bus ticket home. Sadly, the worst news came weeks after the trip. Another adult had encountered this guy coming out of a bar during one of our evening activities because “he needed something to make it through a week with these kids.” Had I known this at the time, I would have sent him home!

What did I learn? Never recruit trip leaders out of desperation—find adults THAT I KNOW love God, like junior highers, and are willing servants. And I learned I had to be VERY clear about adult expectations. I've grown as a youth worker and as a recovering people pleaser. I cannot jeopardize the trust that parents have put in me to meet a quota. If I'd had a frank discussion with parents and with our church family, instead of panicking, we likely could've found a vastly more qualified volunteer.

CALL OUT THE COPTERS!

by Darren Sutton

I serve in a beach town. Flat lands, sand, sea, and palm trees as far as the eye can see. While most student ministries were packing up to come our way for a summer trip, we were packing up to head to the mountains of New Mexico. The scenery was amazing. The services were inspiring. The camp staff was impactful. But the weather was atrocious. Several of our students took a hiking workshop and were really looking forward to the “lab” portion of the class, where they'd get to actually hike the mountain. Unfortunately, inclement weather delayed the hike.

Unbeknownst to any of our leaders or the camp staff, four of my students decided they could make the hike on their own—and still make it back before dinner undetected. About three quarters of the way up the mountain, they realized there was no way they were making it back on time, so they took a short-cut coming down—leaving the trail.

Needless to say, these flat-land surf bunnies had no idea how to get back to camp. By dinner, we all realized the foursome were lost. Camp came to a screeching halt. Staff searched into the wee hours, finding nothing. In the crucible of my waiting and helplessness, I was hearing others use code words for finding students dead or dismembered, and I knew it was time to call pastors and parents.

The next morning, search teams and rescue helicopters were dispatched—and after 24 hours in 40-degree temperatures (dead-winter where we're from) in the mountains, wearing flip-flops and with just one water bottle to share between them all, they were found.

Though I'm known for "running a tight ship" in student ministry (normally, I would've sent all those kids home), I offered grace—stunning our entire team. In those moments after midnight when I was hearing talk of bears and cliffs that were invisible even during daylight hours and the serious possibility that these kids might be found dead, I had a small glimpse into the heart of the father in the prodigal son saga. In that moment, I didn't care why they left, how many rules had been broken, or what they had done—I just wanted them home. Since that harrowing experience, I've learned that mercy and justice don't exist independently— sometimes they're served up on the same plate, in differing quantities.

Contributor: various authors