



2021 ACS Humanitarian Awards **Camp Attaway** *Community Impact Award (small nonprofit)*

Over 25 years ago Howard Co Recreation and Parks came to Dr. Saul Lieberman, a child psychologist who had extensive experience working with children with emotional and behavioral issues because HCPR had children in their after school and summer camp programs that their staff were not equipped to deal with. It was clear to HCPR and Dr. Lieberman that these children needed a specially designed therapeutic summer camp experience in order to succeed.

Summer 2020 was Camp Attaway's 25th season of serving children with special needs and their families. Not only does Camp Attaway provide a therapeutic summer camp but also provides year-round parent training and support groups run by a child psychologist so parents are better equipped to deal with the challenges they face and provides support, so they don't feel so isolated nor judged. Camp Attaway was founded so all children, even those with complex emotional and behavioral challenges would be able to have a summer filled with fun memories, friendship and personal development.

To give you a sense of the depth that Attaway effects lives—below is part of letter of support Attaway received from Marsha Dawson, Program Manager at the Howard County Local Children's Board. "I write to you to bring to your attention the critical role Camp Attaway plays in supporting families in crisis here in Howard County. ...I am very familiar with families in the county who are in crisis and need intensive support. Unfortunately, in many of these cases there are mental health needs that affect both children and sometimes their parents as well. Frankly, there are not enough mental health resources, and programs designed to support children with mental health and behavioral challenges, especially ones equipped to deal with children that display aggression and have behavioral outbursts. These families often have nowhere to turn and are in desperate need of support and programs for their children.

Our Local Care Team (LCT) is made up of a cross section of representatives from diverse service providers in the county, including Department of Social Services, DSS, DJS, and HCPSS that come together in a multidisciplinary team approach designed to give assistance and direct families that have children with the most intense needs and offer assistance and direct them to much needed resources. Please understand, it is not uncommon for the families we are working with to need hospital or involuntary placements.

In one LCT meeting a mother, whose family was in crisis, told us about how her son had been expelled from several camp programs and that "Camp Attaway had been his saving grace." She expressed how very grateful she was for the services Camp Attaway provided her family.

This is not the first time our Local Care Team has heard from a family that was in crisis and Camp Attaway was there to play a critical role.

Please understand families like the one I described above are often struggling to keep their heads above water, and I whole heartedly write this letter of support to underscore the important role Camp Attaway has played and I sincerely hope continues to play in supporting this underserved segment of children and their families in need here in Howard County."

To give you a sense of the way that Attaway impacts lives —below is an excerpt from a letter written by an Attaway parent this past year.

"I am writing to share with you the positive impact Camp Attaway has had on both my son and our entire family. It is an extraordinary place that has changed our lives in more ways than you can imagine. My son has been fortunate enough to attend the past three summers and is literally the best thing that has ever happened to him. I love hearing about all of the positive things he's learning, and how he sets daily goals and meets them, not to mention the amount of one-on-one time he gets with the phenomenal counselors. It is the ONLY place my son goes where he is not judged and can interact with other kids safely. We LITERALLY plan our summer around the camp dates because attending Attaway is out #1 priority."

As a founding board member of Camp Attaway I have heard the parental gratitude expressed in Ms. Dawson's letter and the parent quote above countless times.

As we look around, we can see many in need, however, those in need of mental health services remain undeserved in Howard County. NIMH reports that out of the tens of millions of people affected by mental health illness, less than half receive any treatment in their lifetime. Individuals with comprehensive mental health needs, even in a progressive county like Howard County, have few options.

Research further shows that half of all mental health issues start before the age of 14. Unaddressed childhood mental health issues change brain chemistry further complicating a child's development, choices and behavior. Solutions for this complex issue are equally multifaceted, but Howard County has a unique program, Camp Attaway, that aids these underserved children and their families.

As a psychologist, I am fortunate to have served on the Camp Attaway Board of Directors since the camp's inception in 1996. Over the years, I have seen its effectiveness. To illustrate, I once evaluated a fourth-grade girl who was overwhelmed by mental health issues that spiraled into suicidal ideation and aggressive behaviors. Her issues required hospitalizations despite attending a Howard County school program for children with emotional and behavioral disorders, medication and on-going therapy. As a result of the evaluation, I referred her to Camp Attaway to help strengthen her coping and social skills.

At Attaway, she developed a friendship with one of the other campers that sustained throughout the school year, acquired tools and words to express her feelings, and began to take strides toward a more balanced way of interacting. Her parents received strategies in the family education program the camp

offers. Equally important, her parents felt supported by the other group participants, as these families often feel isolated because others do not want these challenging children in their homes for visits. A more recent story involves my grandson who attends second grade in a local county school. The prior two years, he had a boy in his class who was known to have outbursts, screaming fits, and attack others. While this boy is intellectually gifted, he struggled in school due to his behavior. This past summer, he came over to play with my grandson sporting his Camp Attaway hat and t-shirt. When asked about the camp, he regaled my daughter with, "It was AWESOME. It was the best time in my life." Two short scenarios that capture the impact Camp Attaway has on our youth desperate for success. Two short scenarios as to why I continue on the board for more than 20 years. Two short scenarios to illustrate a program that is successful at addressing mental health needs. Two short scenarios that beg for more. Cynthia Ward Sandler, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist.

Attaway incorporated creativity by designing a therapeutic summer program that was specially designed to ensure the success of children with emotional and behavioral challenges.

Camp Attaway utilizes experienced staff from the fields of special education, psychology, school counselors and behaviorists in a 2 to 1 camper to highly trained staff ratio with a child psychologist on site at all times to deal with any behavioral issues that arose in real time. No other camp in Howard Co is staffed in such a way. The ratios and experienced staff are critical for children to do the hard work on themselves while having summer fun.

Attaway also utilized creativity in offering parent training and support groups facilitated by a child psychologist.

In addition to the impact of children and families Attaway also impacts the community in a critical way as Attaway provides teaching and extensive training to its staff so that learned skills can be used in our schools, recreation programs, and counseling programs in communities extending the Attaway impact. Camp Attaway has helped me in my current job as a special education teacher in so many ways! The training we receive prior to camp taught me how to implement a variety of de-escalation strategies and helped me form habits of using positive behavior support."
—Kelsey Orsborne, Special Ed. Teacher