

# 119. Sarah McVay: Heroes with Heart

## **Teddy Allen**

Teddy. Hey everybody. This is Teddy Allen with University Communications at Louisiana Tech and I hope you have seen a copy of the winter 2025, 1894 which is our Louisiana Tech magazine. Lot of good news in there about your flagship university. And one of our main stories in this winter magazine is heroes with hearts, and it's about a retreat that we're going to tell you about. It's where everyone wins on these special weekends. It's shared by nursing students and some really special campers. Here to talk about that with us is Dr Sarah McVay. She's taking a break from setting some fractures and doing blood pressure and just generally making people feel better. Glad you're here, Sarah, thank you Good morning. Let me introduce you to to what Sarah and her gang have dreamed up med camps. Of course, a bunch of y'all know is that camp Alabama in Choudrant, and it serves as a recreational and educational camping experiences for those living with chronic illnesses and disabilities. And while it hosts family camp weekends, we've got a twice a year heroes with heart weekends, those are for young campers and nursing students only. It's not a very old deal that we've invented, but Sarah, you came up with the idea one day Tell us how that occurred, and then what's transpired since then to make this such a special weekend.

## **Sarah McVay**

Okay, so starting back in probably 2012 was the first time I set foot on May camps grounds and got to experience just how special that place was, bringing kids to camp for the week in the summer, allowing them to do just about anything. No Limits there. And so I, in my mind, just put a lot of thoughts together. And so in 2019 reached out to Caleb Seaney, who is their executive director, and said, Can I bring my students I teach in the pediatric nursing course at Louisiana Tech in our associate degree program and finding clinical sites for pediatric course is difficult in our area, and so with some magical moves, we were able to do our first weekend retreat with about 30 plus students and 30 plus campers, and we stayed all weekend, and Those campers were paired with nursing students who provided 100% of their care throughout the weekend, not only their medical care, their medicines and so forth, but also just the fun part of the weekend. So they we experience that all together

## **Teddy Allen**

Just specifically so we can see it better when these campers and their families, what kind of what are some of the special situations that they're dealing with?

## **Sarah McVay**

Okay, so a lot of these campers come and it's their very first time away from home, or it's their very first time their parents have been at home without them. It is a camper who probably needs 24 hour assistance in some form or fashion, or needs 24 hour standby, watching over not someone you could leave at home alone. And so when they met, it is a time for them to ask questions from the family, ask questions from whoever their caregiver may be. What makes the weekend go smooth for both of them as a camper and a student, and so it's it's amazing. I think one of the neatest parts is to see how

refreshed those parents are at the end of the weekend, when they've had some time to themselves, which is often the first time in many years

**Teddy Allen**

what medical conditions range from what to what for these camps.

**Sarah McVay**

So our campers can range in quite the variety during the summer time, we pair everyone together, so they're very similar week to week. But on this weekend retreat, it is a plethora of things. So we may have cerebral palsy, autism Down syndrome, spina bifida, sickle cell, traumatic brain injury. I've had quite the variety. So even if you're one camper that student's been paired with, they have opportunity to learn from every camper that's out there that we can

**Teddy Allen**

I think one thing Sarah, that's just makes me feel good about you and about what's going on out there is that there wasn't a certain event that happened that made you want to be a nurse. You just something about you made you want to care for people, yes. And so you were out there doing that with these all week camps, just helping. And then exhausted you and some of the others were sitting in the lounge after it was all over, and you said, how could I get my my people involved to help out here? So how has it helped? I know it's obviously helps the campers to get that much attention. Their parents have a little time off, but your students have responded in what way?

**Sarah McVay**

So my students always they get to write an essay. That is why they want to be a nurse, and we go through all. Of the motions of, well, we give medicine and we do task and we take care of patients in a hospital setting and different things. But in actuality, you wanted to be a nurse because of an inside passion that you have to help others. And so a lot of times, that passion gets burned out very quickly, even in nursing school, or your first years in actual nursing at the bedside, and this weekend experience, or even just for myself, reignites that passion of truly wanting to be there for somebody to provide what they need. But I always say this, they give me as much as I give them, like it's a it's a dual kind of win situation. And so to hear my students go, Gosh, I know now why I became a nurse, and I don't want to lose that passion, because nursing burnout is real. We need nurses 100% across the board of Louisiana and everywhere. And so I love to bring the students back to this, because oftentimes they already need that passion reignited. Nursing School is hard,

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but apparently our students get coached up pretty well. We have 100% placement rate, yes, is that correct? And there's a desperate need for nurses, and Louisiana Tech is fulfilling that we have associates degree now the bachelor's, we can learn more about that go to latech.edu there's also some videos of camp. And of course, the pictures in 1894 prices to see these students with these precious campers, Ella grout, our Shreveport. She was one of our participants in the most recent camp, and she is a said that the weekend surpassed every expectation I had. It gave me a chance to grow, not just as a nurse, but also to reconnect with a passion that allowed me to nursing in the first place, which I think

is what you were speaking of. And she had a special bond with her camper for when she graduated. Tell us about commencements

**Sarah McVay**

what commencement was last week. And interestingly enough, we make very close bonds with those that we care with, and it was our care for. And it was very interesting. We were down in the bottom of the Thomas assembly center, and Ella came to me. She said, Carter, that was her camper. She said, Carter's mom just reached out to me and sent a picture with Carter with his hands in the air congratulating me on my graduation. And so with tears in her eyes, she was super excited about that connection she had made during just a class and a, you know, a responsibility she had for class, but a response, a response and a connection that she will have for a lifetime. Now,

**Teddy Allen**

Ella and these other students, I'm sure they, when they show up here, they think they've got a pretty good grasp on nursing and what's happening, but you told me perspective when the parents start talking to it that they had considered before, and that really, you know, opens their eyes. So what is, what is? What is she talking about in that regard?

**Sarah McVay**

I think the biggest thing is not every student is going to be a pediatric nurse, but I have to kind of bring them back to reality, a child with cerebral palsy will also be an adult with cerebral palsy. A child with autism will be a growing adult that has autism, and we will face those challenges throughout our entire nursing career. So whether you choose to be a pediatric nurse or an adult nurse, the concepts that you are able to understand in my pediatric course, you will actually use in the adult world. These campers may one day need their gallbladder taken out or something like that. And just experiencing the weekend with these campers, maybe even looking at it in or looking into their world as an outsider. You see their challenges that they face, and know that how to help them as they're an adult, even their caregivers at that time.

**Teddy Allen**

Another aspect I was curious about was, if I go to the hospital and one of your nurses help me if my blood pressure is high or. I need a hip replacement. We may be getting into that stage or something like that is one deal, or they need to give me stitches from where I fell down playing in the yard. But these campers have transportation needs medicine. How do your how do, how do your students react to that?

**Sarah McVay**

So I always bring it into reality, and I use this example, when your mom or your parent or your caregiver took you through car line at school, it was a quick in and out, grab your backpack, run into school and the day starts. I'm actually have my. Students tour the family vehicle, and they think that's the craziest part of the assignment. And they're like, Why? Why do I have to go look at their car? I said, it's possibly very different than what your car or your family vehicle look like. And so they don't understand the assignment until they've come back from it, and they said, Wow, you know, this camper had a wheelchair, but they don't have a wheelchair van, so mom pulls out the four wheeler ramp, and she has to take the wheelchair down. Then she has to pick up, physically, the child, and place the child in the

wheelchair. Things squeak. There's lots of equipment, medicine. It's not a quick in and out, and so it brings to light a new appreciation for things, but also an understanding for that family

### **Teddy Allen**

Louisiana. Tech has helped make it more joyful for our parents and for students by boat ramps and art room and a fascinating litany of things that school has partnered with, with Caleb and the gang at Med camps are you tell, tell us the difference that makes

### **Sarah McVay**

Okay, a huge difference without our crew at Med camps that has come from tech, our initial first connection out there was with our architecture students here at Louisiana Tech, they have made activities that would normally not be available, they made those actually available. We can put a wheelchair child into a canoe safely without it tipping or anything. We can fly a kid through the air for hundreds of feet in a zip line because of their magical work at our zip line, and then we've just made it a creative adventure with Whitney Causey and her group and their murals throughout camp. So they're coming to their own special world when they come. And so these kids are not given any limits on anything that they can do out there.

### **Teddy Allen**

You mentioned Whitney, who's one of our professors, incredibly talented with her art, and her little girl is a camper, M'Lynn and, and Whitney said she's just so grateful the way M'Lynn When she comes back home, she's like different and more open and and, and also your students. She knows from being a teacher that hands on makes the difference. Yes, do your students express that to you? Like,

### **Sarah McVay**

Oh, definitely. So reading about it in a book is nothing compared to living it full life. And I was actually talking to Whitney, her daughter has Angelman syndrome. And in the years that I've taught pediatrics, initially, it was not in my book that we use it recently that condition made it and it's a paragraph. So a paragraph of information about a condition versus a weekend experience hands on with a child with that condition is monumental. I mean, you can't ask for better. And so when M'Lynn comes and she is just a bright, shining star. Those students just really gravitate to experience her and her condition and her family and their support 100% you can't put that in a classroom, so you have to go to that experience

### **Teddy Allen**

even Whitney, who's the mom, said she wasn't aware of it until she discovered that M'Lynn had it. And then this helps your students, to quote her, she says, they become aware of the symptoms that come along with it, and they come to understand the beauty within and who M'Lynn is, which is a whole different ballgame, just seeing somebody who needs maybe some kind of medical right? Is that part of Clint what we call clinical reasoning? And

### **Sarah McVay**

yes, so that is clinical reasoning. So we talk a lot about communication and teamwork and critical thinking, and I kind of coin it as making the big picture and putting that all together. You have to be able

to experience it firsthand and use all of your senses. How do I communicate with someone who doesn't use words? How do I communicate or know what my my patient or my camper, or whomever may need if they communicate or go throughout their day different than I do, and so those are critical thinking skills that we teach, but are hard to practice until you get into the actual scenario.

### **Teddy Allen**

Sarah, tell us about the personality test that we use as part of heroes for hearts, and how that goes along with teamwork, which is your probably your number one goal out there.

### **Sarah McVay**

So in the academic world, you always have outcomes that have to be met by your students, and teamwork and collaboration is probably our top one. My going motto that my kids will always hear is that you can't solve the world alone, and so what better way than to see what their true personalities are, and pair them with probably the total opposite. I have students who've actually gotten to this quarter, which is their six of seven nursing quarters, and never talking, talked to some classmates. And so when you go off in the real nursing world, you've got to make friends very quickly and learn what each other's strengths and weaknesses are. So our personality test makes that happen, and that is how we achieve that goal is giving them their autonomy to find their strengths and weaknesses and also pair with another student to provide what's needed for their camper that weekend.

### **Teddy Allen**

And this is all, of course, to teach us how to care for a child with multiple needs and seeing what the child needs to be successful.

### **Sarah McVay**

huh, what they need to be successful. No Limits. How do I register? Okay, very easy. Medcamps.org. Takes you to a magnificent website with pictures, videos, connections to not only their staff, but to their nurse. It is offered in the summers, the last weekend of May, all the way through the first weekend of August, and each week is varied by conditions, so that there are like children together, easy online application and a phone number, should you have any questions, and 100% free, no charge for families at all.

### **Teddy Allen**

Santana Lang, and wrapping this up, a couple more things. She's 23 and she's a senior from Covington, and she was trying to after meeting her camp her feeder with a little tube, and she was nervous. She was and so was the camper, yes, but they made it through that. She figured out how to communicate, and the little girl clearly said, Thank you, she did, and that's a big dirt and then she started laughing. And then Santana said that that just reaffirmed her passion for helping others in a real, meaningful way by using her personality in her hands.

### **Sarah McVay**

Yeah, so they had quite a challenge initially, and I saw that fear, but let them kind of move on through teamwork together. And in the end of that just quick experience, on that first day, they went from a

difficulty in knowing what they needed to do, how to communicate with their camper, and in the end, by the end of the weekend, y'all, they were just they sang Taylor Swift songs, and they were singing and talking about boys and and typical, you know, teenager kind of things. And so in all honesty, it helped her to realize her passion and why she truly did become a nursing student with a future in nursing.

**Teddy Allen**

Well, for more information, again, medcamps.org, as Sarah said, of course, latech.edu You can search for nurses. You can you can email teddy@latech.edu and I won't know the answer, but I will know who to find to get you the answer. And the folks at Med camps are awesome to work with. Again, our architecture students are beautiful, and our nursing students are making a difference. And this to you is, I think I've heard you refer to it as your little piece of heaven that you need. You need patience, because serving them fulfills your purpose. What you feel your purpose is

**Sarah McVay**

definitely my little place of heaven that gives me that, that completion and just that desire to help others. But I always say, I they help me as much as I help them.

**Teddy Allen**

The heroes with hearts retreat. It's a weekend, but it goes on forever while our students learn at that weekend, not only teamwork, but one on one with these special, special campers. We're grateful for them. We're grateful for our special nursing students. We could go on and on forever. Sarah, it's, it's always a joy talking to you. Just there's nothing phony about you. As far as I'm sure you would have made a great engineer, or journalist, but thank God that you're a nurse. Anything else you want to say? Just to wrap up, this, this conversation, this, this way to introduce this wonderful weekend to everyone

**Sarah McVay**

I can't think of anything specific, other than we are just thankful to med camps for this opportunity, being one of the only nursing schools in the state of Louisiana that are given this opportunity,

**Teddy Allen**

and this kind of opportunity is at the very heart of nursing Thank You. Thank You for for spreading the love that our students can Can, can effectively work with these, these campers, to make them successful. Thank you for joining us on this, on this special healing episode of beyond 1894 this teddy Allen play it.

**Gavin Kelly**

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