

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Music makes this camp a classic

By [FRANK MICKADEIT](#)

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It's parental ritual: Go fetch a kid from summer camp. I went with a friend on her such mission. The destination was Arrowbear Music Camp, 6,300 feet up in the San Bernardino Mountains. I knew the camp had a great Long Beach story angle, but as I sat amid the oaks and conifers waiting for the teen musicians to perform a summer's-end concert before everyone headed down the mountain, I learned there was a strong O.C. story, too.

I had introduced myself to the woman seated on the bench next to us, **Eloise Coopersmith** of San Clemente. Her 14-year-old son, **Cooper Johnson**, was on stage playing the French horn. She raved about Arrowbear. Cooper been through some serious drama during the school year, she would later tell me. Three weeks at Arrowbear had

turned him back into the happy kid she knew.

Then the camp director made a couple of introductions to the audience. **Val Jamora**, the music director, was a teacher from Corona del Mar High. The assistant camp director, **Ross Durand**, taught science at Rancho Alamitos. Each was marking his 31st summer at Arrowbear as a camper, counselor, teacher or administrator. "I'm pretty much a teacher today because of this camp," Jamora would tell me later. Durand said the same thing.

This place was reeking of Orange County. I got my notebook and camera from the car.

The camp story, indeed, starts in Long Beach, in 1942, where **Fred Ohlendorf** was the supervisor of music for public schools. He had a junior orchestra he wanted to treat to an outing and he decided to take it to Arrowbear, where the father of his wife, **Edna**, had a Bible camp. That one-week retreat has turned into a summer-long series of three-week sessions for young musicians. When Fred and Edna died, their daughter and son-in-law, **Carole and Dennis Dockstader**, continued to run the camp. Carole passed away in 2010. Their daughter, **Larke**, now works alongside her father. Larke's niece also helps out, meaning five generations of Edna's family have worked on the 100-acre parcel.

While the roots are in Long Beach, there has been a lot of O.C. talent over the years. Longtime Capo Unified music teacher **Karen Tkaczyk**, then of Anaheim, was a camper in the 1960s. The Orange County School of the Arts in Santa Ana contributes campers like Cooper.

My friend's son, **Marcos**, took us on a tour. It's not fancy, but it appears functional and fun. There are a couple of bunkhouses for boys and girls, some A-frame structures that serve as a laundry room, a specially humidified room for the stringed instruments, an office and such. He took us on a short climb up Happy Cap, a rock formation where *in theory* you can get a cell signal if one were to violate camp rules.

Total rehearsal time ranges from three to five hours a day, depending on the age group. I was blown away at the orchestra these kids comprised after working together just three weeks. But whether you talk to the kids or staff, the degree of musicianship seems of less import than the catalyst the music serves to get them together and explore the art and its relationship to their lives.

Marcos, 15, is at heart really a guitarist; he picks up the violin so he can have a classical instrument to play at Arrowbear. Cooper talks about the nightly campfires when the instruments are put away and the kids just talk. "I talked to the other kids like they were my brothers and sisters," Cooper told me. "I didn't make friends, I made a family." That kind of choked me up; it was so heartfelt, plus I knew from his mom what he'd been through. *How profound*, I thought. Then Cooper added: "People are super chill. You can burp in their face and they'll still love you." *Noted*.

The friendship of Jamora and Durand is testament that Cooper is right, though. Jamora was from Calexico and Durand from Thousand Oaks, but during their summers at Arrowbear, they forged a lifelong friendship. Durand actually got married at Arrowbear in 1995; Val was his best man.

The music instruction, Jamora told me, is "about the spiritual, not the mechanical. That's why we're up here. Not to just play it well, but *why* we're playing it well. I want them to be people who can perceive beauty. That's the most important thing to me. Because that's the gift I was given."

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