

Forging Camps - A Biographical Sketch



David Caldwell loves skate-sailing on Lake George. What's it like, skimming over black ice at 40 miles an hour? "It's a thrill! It's you, the lake, the mountains and the wind," Caldwell explains.

For now, it's a thrill that Caldwell, 48, has put on hold. He has taken on a different challenge: starting Christian youth camps in Mexico. David and his wife, Karen, are missionaries working with Camps International, of which Caldwell is the founder or, in his words, "a catalyst." Caldwell is currently developing camps in the state of Michoacán and is a member of the board for Christian Camping International-Mexico.

Caldwell and his three brothers were the fifth generation raised on the family's 60-cow dairy farm near Albany, NY. In addition to helping his dad milk the cows at 4:30 in the morning on weekends, he fed livestock and fixed machinery. Caldwell recalls often seeing his father on his knees in prayer by the breakfast table just before chores. "That's how I caught the values and vision of what I'm doing now." The farm is still "a tight home place," even though none of the brothers ended up as farmers.

As a teen David came to commit his life to Christ through a thought-provoking sermon given by Dr. Tony Campolo. Caldwell remembers, "It became clear that there is a God, and therefore I needed to order my life according to His Word."

In high school, Caldwell learned leadership skills from teacher Frank Basil. "I was put in roles of responsibility, and he walked us kids through many community projects," he recalls.

Caldwell served as president of the 120-member Future Business Leaders of America. These experiences in leadership would stand him in good stead later on, as a missionary to Mexico.

Caldwell considered studying horticulture in college, but instead, after a year at Roberts Wesleyan College, he majored in business management. In 1980, he earned an associate's degree in data processing and marketing from SUNY Cobleskill. At Cobleskill he was instrumental in bringing Intervarsity Christian Fellowship to the campus. He earned a bachelor's degree in management from SUNY Institute of Technology at Utica/Rome in 1983 and in the mid-80s he acquired teacher certification in math and business from credits acquired at Siena College and Schenectady County Community College. Later, he earned his master's degree in human resource leadership from Azusa Pacific University.

David served as a camp counselor for a few summers between studies and then as a camp program director. The pace was intense, the change in kids— amazing. He still has contact with a couple of campers. Those experiences were like a bellows blowing oxygen into the desire to forge new camps for a generation of eager kids.

In August of 1981, David and Karen were married. They agreed that they would someday take a trip to Papua New Guinea and go around the world. In 1984, Caldwell taught math and science to high school students at Marcy Christian School while Karen, a nurse, worked at St. Luke's Memorial Hospital in Utica, NY. They lived on one salary and saved the other until, in June, they left for Papua New Guinea, a large island in the South Pacific, where Karen's parents worked as translators with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

"God loved me into being a missionary."

For ten months Caldwell worked as a volunteer missionary. He remembers Papua New Guinea as a gorgeous place with colorful insects and beautiful people. He dined on tropical fruit, hiked to the top of 14,793-foot Mount Wilhelm, explored an uncharted cave and swam among brightly colored fish on a coral reef. "There was so much to do and experience that I could have burned out," says Caldwell about his adventure. "But I didn't, because I was having too much fun." Caldwell enthusiastically served as a bookkeeper, taught

school, did computer programming for the missionary's national employment office and assisted with youth work.

Following the New Guinea trip, the Caldwelles moved back to New York, and then, a few years later, they moved to South Carolina, where David heard the call to become a career missionary. "God loved me into being a missionary," Caldwell says. "God took the time and gave me the experiences I needed so I could, in return, love working for Him." David started his missionary venture as part of a church planting team even though the original job description and goal was to develop a Christian camp.



Although the camp goal has been fulfilled in part, Caldwell has encountered many setbacks. In 1998, after visiting the west coast of Mexico in search of a site for a camp, David and Karen became ill, first with Hepatitis A, a virus that attacks the liver, and later with

Epstein-Barr virus. Caldwell and the family moved from Morelia, Michoacán to Lancaster, PA and then to Dallas, TX to recuperate. Church groups in each area reached out to the six children, celebrating birthdays and taking them fishing while David and Karen healed.

Caldwell still suffers from aftereffects of the illnesses. "I really have to watch my health now," he says. Yet with all that, he still values this difficult period in his life. "I look back and see enrichment and character development," he explains. Sickness also gave him time to develop the camp project more fully. He studied during the untold hours in bed, waiting for his body to catch up with the ideas he was discovering.

Following a one-year stay in Oneida, NY, cared for by the Community Church, the Caldwelles headed back to Morelia in the fall of 2001. Just months after their return the first retreat was held. A couple of months later, in a borrowed avocado orchard, the first youth camp was held and hosted 23 campers. Near Morelia, Caldwell bought five acres of property and built his first dome, a prototype for camp cabins. "It was a landmark for us," David explains. In summer of 2004, the Caldwell family moved to Tampico to continue working as camp developers.

In Mexico, Caldwell envisions his job as a facilitator, helping Mexicans develop Christian children's camps for 9- to 16-year-olds. "People need to feel ownership," he says. "But someone is required to bring the needs and abilities together." As commitment builds, he hopes each local camp board will hire a Mexican administrator to run each camp after it is developed.

Caldwell sees Mexico as a place rich with opportunity to work for church unity, to institute the training of new leaders and to minister to the unsaved. Caldwell says, "Youth camps are strategic to the future growth and impact of the Mexican church. My desire is to give young people a chance to experiment with their leadership style and prove their potential in the highly charged and motivating environment of fun-filled Bible camps."

Personality Points of David Caldwell

- ✓ *Influenced by great parents and neighbors.*
- ✓ *Self appointed nickname: Toad (def: despicable man; what he would be apart from the grace of Christ.)*
- ✓ *Extroverted/Intuitive/ Thinking/ Perceiving: Invents things and systems.*
- ✓ *Hopeless sanguine with choleric attributes.*
- ✓ *Motivational gifting: Administration--enjoys connecting people (according to their talents) to meaningful tasks.*
- ✓ *Longs to build a mega camp on a mountain range.*
- ✓ *Fascinated with horticulture and seeing both plants and people grow.*