We build RESILIENCY to unlock the HERO inside.
To be RESILIENT, you need the right tools
KidSpirit sets youth up for success

BY KATHRYN STROPPEL

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, KIDSPIRIT DIRECTOR KAREN SWANGER OVERHEARD THREE BOYS, AROUND 8 TO 10 YEARS OLD, TALKING ABOUT THEIR STRESS. Skeptical, she asked why and was blown away by their response, which included family divorce and financial problems — tough stuff for people at any age.

Her curiosity changed her perspective. “Never assume age is connected to stress,” she says. “Never undervalue someone’s struggle. Life is hard. That moment changed my trajectory and that of KidSpirit.”

Because of that experience, KidSpirit, which offers summer and no-school-day camps for youth, has been laser focused on serving both the needs of the OSU students who help run the camps, as well as the young campers in their care. “The concept for us,” Karen says, “is that as staff work on skills themselves, they model them for the youth they work with.”

The KidSpirit team employs a variety of approaches to build resiliency, which share common themes of choice, self-regulation, personal awareness, self-efficacy and self-confidence, positive thinking, being intentional and mindful, and practicing acceptance and gratitude.

CHANGE BEGINS WITH ME

The phrase “mental health” is rarely spoken at KidSpirit. It’s simply part of its culture. “Just like we don’t say, ‘This training is appropriate for people on the spectrum.’ It’s just good teaching,” says Gabby Schmit, aka Tiger Lilly, a kinesiology undergraduate who has worked at KidSpirit for one year.

They may not say it, but mental health strategies are just what students are learning, and it begins during the onboarding process. Before summer, each of the approximately 100 student staff spends 22 hours in training, and each term more than 45 students further strengthen their skills with six hours of training that includes tools to build resiliency and improve coping skills for themselves and their young campers.

Kendra Zangle, speech communication major, is finishing a nine-credit internship earning special credit in kinesiology. “I’m learning that we’re all in this together. Don’t be afraid to be uncomfortable; it helps you grow.” She may be leaving the internship with 270 hours of experience, but most importantly, she says she’s gained confidence and a sense of belonging.

Kaily MacDougall is a business major who graduated in June 2019 but is sticking around to serve as program coordinator during the summer. Her growth, she says, lies not only in new skills but also in newfound confidence and an appreciation of her capabilities.

“When I first started here, I had no office skills but a can-do attitude,” Kaily says. “I doubted myself and needed a lot of reassurance. I was scared at how much responsibility I was given, but through mentors, trainings and taking on more, I feel I can do this! And if I struggle, I have resources to help. I love the work I do here.”

BUILDING A LIFE TOOLBOX

Karen strives to help students advocate for themselves and to identify self-care skills centered around four key concepts:

1. Know yourself and what fills your bucket.
2. Have confidence in your skills and who you are.
3. Accept that it’s OK to make mistakes. Learning from them is important.
4. Communicate early and often, openly and honestly, and in all formats. No gossip.

These concepts may be innate to Karen, who was raised by a mother/teacher with a growth mindset — a belief that a love of learning and resiliency are essential for success — but she recognizes that not all students have the skills they need to thrive.

“The better you can navigate life, the better you are for yourself and others,” Karen says. “Some come to college with tools that work and some that don’t. Some need new tools.”

In particular, she witnesses students struggling with a key component of growth and positive mental health — self-regulation. She challenges students to explore and answer: What do we do to calm down and bring peace in the midst of uncertainty and stress? How do we self-soothe and self-regulate?

“If I do one thing in life, it’s to give people those skills,” she says. “If you don’t have the appropriate skills and know the hero inside of you, you can’t be strong leaders for youth.”

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~ KAREN SWANGER
KAREN SAYS ...

Resiliency happens one action, one day at a time.

Know yourself and give grace.

Mistakes help us grow. Ask: What did you learn? Did you clean it up? How did you make it better?

What do you need when you’re under stress to help you move forward?

You are not what you think. The worst critic is yourself.

Never undervalue someone else’s struggle.

Choose your attitude.

Have courage — and be curious.

Change “I can’t do that” to “I can’t do that YET.”

Pleasure comes from hard work, not perfection.

There’s no such thing as common sense. We have shared cultural values, which aren’t the same for everyone.

Be kind, and show empathy.

Family impact seminars are one way the CPHHS is living out Oregon State University’s land grant mission.

“The seminars connect state policy makers with research experts to provide the best scientific evidence on topics of current interest,” says Rick Settersten, head of the School of Social and Behavioral Health Sciences. “They are meant to foster learning in a nonpartisan, solution-oriented way, always with a focus on the impact of policies on families.”

So far, the college has hosted three seminars on topics relevant to family health — “Two generation approaches to poverty” in 2015, “School and community solutions to obesity” in 2017 and “How housing policy can make a difference in child and family outcomes” in 2018.

Each seminar has helped inform legislative actions. In 2016, Oregon became the first state to allocate a greater percentage of the earned income tax credit to young families, providing them with more money to live on. House Bill 3141, which requires that K–8 students receive at least 150 minutes of physical education each week, was reinforced in 2017. This year, Oregon signed into law the first statewide rent control bill.

“At the national level, the seminar is a well-established method of connecting researchers and policy makers who are often passionate about the same issues but who sometimes lack a common language or forum for discussion,” says Emily Tomayko, assistant professor of nutrition and project collaborator.

The team will offer a seminar every other September in advance of Oregon’s longer legislative sessions held in odd years.

The interdisciplinary team includes CPHHS Professor Gloria Krahn; Sally Bowman, professor in Extension Family and Community Health; Research Associate Bobbie Weber; and Executive Support Specialist Laura Arreola.

OREGON EARLY LEARNING FACTS AND FINDINGS

For more than 25 years, Oregon researchers and partners have studied early learning in the state. Now you can access the facts and findings in one place at health.oregonstate.edu/early-learners.

Megan Pratt coordinates the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, which conducts research related to child care policy at the local and state levels and prepares the Oregon Early Learning Facts and Findings report.