

Summer camp an anchor for inner-city kids

Nico Trocmé, the featured speaker at a fundraiser for Camp Amy Molson this week, admits he doesn't know a lot about the place that offers fun in the sun to inner-city kids.

A professor of social work hired three years ago by McGill, Trocmé, 48, is still learning about Montreal's large and far-flung network of social agencies and institutions. But he likes Camp Amy Molson sight unseen because Trocmé thinks summer camps are immensely important for disadvantaged children.

Three summers working at a camp for underprivileged kids piqued Trocmé's interest in social work. He saw, at first-hand, the value of "skill development and a lot of emotional support."

Helping those who need it most was the original purpose. Trocmé told me the first summer camps were created by 19th-century benevolent agencies to get the poorest of New York's children out of their steamy tenements.

"You know a program is good," Trocmé said, "when it gets taken over by the middle class."

The bourgeoisie co-opted an altruistic idea and began adding refinements. The contemporary cornucopia of summer camps offers everything from archery to zen.

Camp Amy Molson fulfills the old mandate of giving urban kids a bucolic break. The 73-hectare camp is in Grenville-sur-la-Rouge, across the Ottawa River from Hawkesbury, 100 kilometers northwest of Montreal. It was founded in 1944 by Montreal's Ladies Benevolent Society and named for the Molson family member who donated the property.

This summer, 150 Montreal children between the ages of 5 and 13 will attend each of three two-week sessions at Camp Amy Molson. Most campers are from families whose incomes fall below the poverty line, and 20 per cent of the kids are under the care of Youth Protection.

"I'm always impressed by the resilience of children, their ability to feed off positive aspects of their lives," Trocmé said.

Summer camp can be "an incredible anchor" for children whose families are dealing with poverty, mental illness, substance abuse.

"Camp can be a haven of success and positive relationships," he added. "It's a place where you're not constantly being singled out as the bad kid in class. Maybe your reading difficulty doesn't get in the way when



MIKE BOONE
on Camp Amy Molson

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SOCIAL WORK PROFESSOR NICO TROCMÉ

you're learning how to canoe or build a campfire or work hard to earn your swimming badges. The kids work hard and focus on a real skill."

Fresh air is beneficial to anyone's health. Summer camp, Trocmé says, is particularly valuable for the mental health of needy children who build friendships and a sense of belonging.

"Camp can be very powerful," he said. "It's a very important protective factor for kids who are facing adversity."

Trocmé's office is in Morris Hall, at the corner of University and Prince Arthur St. It is decorated with moody, black-and-white photos of Paris, where Trocmé was born.

He came to North America in the mid-1970s to study at the University of Toronto. Trocmé

joined the McGill faculty as the Phillip Fisher chair in social work. His focus is on families. His office is decorated with toys, action figures – things that make children happy.

His expertise is what makes them sad. Trocmé's research focuses on child abuse and child neglect. He is the director of the Centre for Research on Children and Families, drawing faculty primarily from the school of social work but also nursing, law and psychiatry.

At a Wednesday evening cocktail fundraiser for Camp Amy Molson at Maison Alcan, Trocmé will talk about children at risk and community-based activities to combat child abuse.

"It's a powerful term," Trocmé said, "and at times I wish we had better words than 'child abuse' because it pushed us toward thinking the best thing to do is involve the authorities. Reporting has to happen, but what comes with that often is turning our backs on the problem. There's not much the authorities can do without support from the community."

Trocmé would like to see social policies geared toward combating mistreatment of children "at the grassroots level – things like summer camps for high-risk kids are absolutely critical."

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