



MEMBERS OF RIGHT TREE ADVENTURE AND FREEDOM BUILDERS STAND IN FRONT OF AN INTERLOCHEN HOME THEY HELPED REPAIR IN JULY.

POWERFUL WOMEN (of tomorrow): RIGHT TREE ADVENTURE CAMP

Girls are gaining confidence through service and adventure at a time they need it most: **MIDDLE SCHOOL**

BY KRISTEN LOWE

IT'S A HOT SUMMER DAY. Kids across Traverse City are soaking up the sun at the beach, hanging out on boats or playing Pokémon Go on their phones.

A few miles away, 13-year-old Olivia Ferguson hammers a nail into a small home in Interlochen. It's one of the finishing touches she's making on Betsy Warren's new roof. Without this work, the home likely would not have made it through next winter.

Warren knew she was getting help replacing her roof this summer. But she never dreamed it would be from a team of middle school girls.

"I was blown away!" she said. "I couldn't believe it. It's something I've never seen before."

This is Olivia's third summer participating with Right Tree Adventures, a non-profit organization in Elk Rapids that uses outdoor recreation and adventure programming to speak positively into girls' lives. This summer, the middle schoolers sailed, climbed trees, played life-sized foosball, backpacked a national forest in Kentucky and explored a Northern Michigan island... just to name a few things.

"They challenge you a lot," Olivia said. "Some of the stuff that we do here, I would've never done because it's not 'in my box.' So I got out of the box!"

This summer, Olivia and eight other girls at Right Tree Adventures are partnering with Freedom Builders. Together they're making much-needed repairs on homes of people in need. They're re-doing roofs, painting houses and building wheelchair ramps.

The service aspect to Right Tree's program is new this year. Board President Craig Mosher said it's been well received.

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"Girls don't usually get to use nail guns and power tools and whatnot," Mosher said. "They're very much into it."

Mosher got the idea about adding service to the program from watching his own kids grow up: "A lot of those community service projects were raising money for your own uniforms or computers in your school, and not really the altruistic... you do things because it's the right thing to do."

That's why Right Tree Adventures added this new component—helping the community and empowering young girls in the process. Some could say Mosher's organization is helping build the next generation of powerful women in the area, girls motivated by compassion.

So far, the move definitely seems to be working.

"I feel really happy I got to help this woman that I probably would have never known was in this situation," Olivia said. "Now [her roof] won't collapse on her one day in the winter... and I feel happy with myself that I got over my fear of heights and actually did stuff on a roof."

It's an act of kindness, but the benefits are twofold. People in need get their homes repaired, and local teens gain confidence by doing things they never thought they could.

"A lot of [the girls] have these fears and they don't really know why," Right Tree Program Director Charissa Hayden said. "Society tells them: 'Oh, you're a girl so you shouldn't do these things.' Then they do them and they realize that they actually enjoy it. It's really fun to watch."

The activities are seemingly simple, but the effects are deep. Boat rides and service projects are accompanied by campfire chats about confidence, setting goals and dreaming big. Through it all, the girls are guided by the leadership of Mosher, Hayden and several devoted counselors.

"They talk a lot about personal stuff and perseverance and strength," Olivia said. "It's made me realize more and become a better person."

In a world where women are constantly being told what they don't have, Right Tree is fighting back.

"You're not tall enough... thin enough... rich enough... popular enough. Those are the kinds of things that they're hearing," Mosher said. "Our mission to them is: You are enough. You are enough right now and you are becoming something amazing."

Imagine if every middle school girl could hear those words.

It's a message that Mosher and the team want as many girls as possible to receive. The programs are open to any girl going into 7th, 8th or 9th grade who lives in the Elk Rapids school district. All programs are available on a donation basis. Kids pay if they can, but they don't have to.

"We just want girls to come, and [then] leave with more confidence and more faith in who they are and who they're becoming," Mosher said.

Right Tree is funded partially through Right Tree Adventure Rental Shop in downtown Elk Rapids. The shop is stocked with everything from kayaks to paddleboards to adult pogo sticks, all available to rent on a donation basis. Donations go directly back to the program. Mosher said the shop funds about half of the camp. The other half comes through donations and grants.

After a hard day's work helping, Olivia said, "I feel really happy!"

To learn more about how Right Tree Adventures is inspiring the next generation of strong women in the Elk Rapids area, head to www.righttree.org.



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