



Rich Cooley/Daily

Cletus Nicely, 9, of Clifton Forge, gets ready to fire a ball during a game of Plunder. Timber Ridge Bible Camp offers a variety of activities including horseback riding, swimming, a rifle range and a go-kart track.

Leap of faith

Woodstock church takes a chance and buys 80-acre camp

By Ashley Miller
The Northern Virginia Daily

The first time Pastor Ken Sparks saw a firefly dancing on a cloudless summer's eve, he was 7 years old and attending summer camp. That moment changed his life forever. "I'd never seen a firefly before," said Sparks, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Woodstock. "It was like fireworks. And I remember saying, 'Well, God, you are a great creator.' And to this day they still mesmerize me." Church camp was where Sparks enjoyed canoeing and sailing, where he made friends, first acknowledged God and accepted the Lord as his personal savior. Camp transformed not only Sparks, but his family's and put him on his life's path.



Rich Cooley/Daily

Grace Baptist Church pastor Ken Sparks conducts morning chapel class at Timber Ridge Bible Camp in High View, West Virginia, to a group of teens. Grace Baptist Church, located in Woodstock, purchased the foreclosed camp and uses it as an outreach ministry as a summer youth camp.



MacKenzie Jenkins, 13, of Toms Brook, listens to Pastor Sparks speak during chapel. Jenkins came to camp after being invited by a friend.



Bryan Nichols, 10, of Leesburg munches on watermelon during lunch.

Camp

Continued from A1

“I was preaching at camps every summer for 10 years,” Sparks said. “So, literally, from the time I was 7 until now I’ve been in a camp, in some aspect, every summer of my life.”

Camp has been so important to Sparks that when he found out that Timber Ridge Camp in High View, West Virginia, was in foreclosure he jumped at the chance to acquire the 80-acre property. And now he’s called “Chief” at Timber Ridge Bible Camp, a mission of Grace Baptist Church.

Next to the Cacapon River and nestled in the mountains, Timber Ridge Bible Camp immerses campers in the wonders of nature. Offering a wide variety of activities such as kayaking, archery, horsemanship, pottery and fishing, Sparks said the camp activities were designed to help build character, while teaching responsibility and helping campers connect and grow closer to God.

Traveling six hours from Wingate, North Carolina, camp counselor Lizbeth Santos returned to Timber Ridge this summer after she realized the impact she had on campers in 2022.

“There’s nothing that compares to seeing it,” Santos said. “They’re all from different backgrounds, some have never been to camp before, some come from a place where their home life isn’t great. For them to be able to come here for a week, set that aside and be able to have fun as a kid — that means the world to me.”

Sparks believes the power of camp is to get children away from their cell phones and earbuds and put them out in God’s creation, reminding them that there is a creator and that God loves them.

“He’s got a purpose for you — for us. And you give them God’s word. You love them, teach them, instruct them and you pour your life into their lives, some for a week or some for two weeks. And it’s a life-changing experience for all involved.”

Sparks has been the pastor of Grace Baptist Church for 10 years, and for as long as he can remember he’s had the idea of opening a Bible camp. It was by happenstance when a piece of property in High View came on his



Abby Nicely, 14, of Clifton holds her Bible during chapel at Timber Ridge Bible Camp.



Josiah Martin, 14, of Selma, Virginia, holds his Bible in his lap as he listens to pastor Ken Sparks speak during chapel service at Timber Ridge Bible Camp.

radar.

Appraised at \$7.5 million, the church acquired the 80 acres for \$1 million. But there were a few hiccups along the way.

The land housed 64 buildings.

“It was all overgrown. You couldn’t see the front of the buildings. It was a mess,” Sparks said.

Knowing he wanted to change children’s lives, Sparks approached the bank with a simple idea: a Bible camp, where children from all walks of life would learn biblical principles, character, work ethic and patriotism.

Putting his trust in the Lord, Sparks approached his parishioners. He recalled receiving some push back, after all, it was an expensive piece of property and a massive endeavor for a 148-member congregation. He created a business plan and drove his parishioners to see the campsite, casting a vision of what the camp could look like.

“That’s a pretty good deal right,” he told his parishioners. “And what’s the worst-case scenario? We try to run a camp. It doesn’t work. We turn around and sell it.”

Before closing, Sparks had to convince his church that investing in the camp was the right idea. Prior to the purchase, Sparks had recognized that the church had too much money sitting in the bank.

As they approached closing on the sale, Sparks received a call. “Churches in Virginia and West Virginia can’t buy more than 70 acres,” he was told. To combat this issue, an LLC was formed, allowing the church to buy the bulk of the land and the LLC to buy the rest.

Not wanting to waste any time, Sparks got a waiver to begin working on the property. He said they spent \$120,000 on the Chapel before they even closed with the bank. He estimates that more than \$500,000 has been invested into the campsite.

“We worked in the dining hall, we were doing electrical work. We had machines in here, and we’re spending money,” he said. “We’re working and we’re not closing.”

Sparks recruited volunteers for their first year, but there were no campers. Since the camp didn’t have

electricity, staff was housed in Woodstock. Church members worked daily, cooked on grills, ran generators for every project. They held a dedication ceremony, but Sparks was still worried that the step of faith he had taken could crumble at any moment.

Months later, after one final hurdle with the acreage, the church was able to close on the property. While t-shirts say the camp was established in 2020, it officially welcomed its first campers in 2022.

While it’s not always easy to keep 400 campers a week busy, Sparks said when he sees a camper hit the archery target for the first time and their face lights up or a camper from Maryland who has never been around a horse, gets to ride one, it’s a reminder of what God has created.

MacKenzie Jenkins, of Toms Brook, attended Timber Ridge this summer after her friend talked her into



Jacob Parsons, 11, of Moyock, North Carolina, grabs a piece of pizza as he goes through the lunch line of the camp’s cafeteria. Moraiah Smith, left, of Spring Mills, Pennsylvania, helps serve lunch. Smith and all the kitchen staff are volunteers.



Pastor Sparks delivers water to campers on his ATV. The ATV is a must for the camp’s large footprint.



Pastor Ken Sparks, who goes by “Chief” during camp, speaks to a group of teen boys during chapel service.

attending.

“I don’t have the best relationship with my parents,” Jenkins said. “But the first thing I’m going to do when I get home is buy a Bible, because I don’t have one. And make things right with my parents.”

Sparks has seen and heard his fair share of disheartening stories. Just last summer, Sparks said, after talking about the danger of drinking, a camper came up to him crying. The 12-year-old admitted she had a drinking problem that began when she was 6.

“I’ve never experienced that before,” he said. “Young girls, junior campers, share things with their counselors that they’re going through; sometimes you just don’t know.”

Realizing he would never have been able to do this without his church’s financial sacrifice, Sparks has big plans for the future of Timber Ridge. Sparks has opened the camp to adults, welcom-

ing the Warrior Class Men’s Advance and the Ladies of Liberty Women’s Advance for weekend workshops. He also hopes to be able to offer a trade school, where teenagers can learn the basics of electrical work, welding and carpentry.

In 2024, Sparks said campers will enjoy a new coffee shop, with coffee delivered to their cabins before morning devotions. Sparks said he hopes the camp will financially be on good footing and that campers will return for another fun summer.

“Camp is a game changer,” Sparks said. “From when kids get saved, from kids developing skills, from growing their confidence, getting better for their parents, trying to look for a future that’s not centered around themselves with other people, changing the direction of these kids. I can’t put a price on that.”

— Contact Ashley Miller at amiller@nvdaily.com

Photos by Rich Cooley/Daily