

# When Kids Matter

This River Park couple changes lives, one child at a time



By Terry Kaufman  
Local Heroes

**T**ucker and Jennifer Farrar are the proud parents of an almost 1-year-old boy who has dozens of older siblings. The Farrars' other kids are the hundreds of children, ages 8 to 18, whom they have taken under their wings through Today's Youth Matter, an organization providing support and guidance, primarily through camping and other outdoor experiences, to foster and at-risk youth in Sacramento and the Bay Area.

For the two former high school teachers, the transition to directing the youth program was a natural. Jen's mother, Marilyn Siden, founded Today's Youth Matter, or TYM, nearly 17 years ago to address the needs of underprivileged and abused kids in the Bay Area. The goal of her program was to provide hope to such children through positive adult mentoring and immersion in Christian values while allowing them to enjoy the great outdoors. Tucker, an avid outdoorsman, loved working with kids but found that organizations such as the National Outdoor Leadership School, where he worked one summer, were missing



Tucker and Jennifer Farrar with their son Greyson and Charlie the dog enjoy a walk along the river

something essential: kids with real needs.

When Jen brought Tucker to the TYM camp in 1999 and introduced him to her mother, something clicked. "He jumped right in," she says. "It was clear that he was gifted working with kids." By 2004, the Farrars had left their teaching jobs to establish the Sacramento branch of TYM, run out of their River Park home. Tucker took on full-time directorship of the program, while Jen provided administrative support. At the beginning, only a handful of

Sacramento-area kids attended the camps. Now, with four and a half paid staff and an annual budget of about \$300,000, TYM takes care of dozens of local kids. They are referred by social service agencies whose caseworkers see promise for clients who have been shuttled between foster homes and written off by society.

For some campers, the experience can be transformative. "A lot of these kids have never been outside their own ZIP code," says Tucker. "Many of them have never seen snow. They see star-filled skies; they experience chilly

mornings. These kids open up in such an environment." For others, the pain is too much to overcome. "There's so much hurt, they don't even notice that there's snow and stars," he says. With time, however, even the toughest kids seem to soften and provide encouragement to their peers in such activities as the rope course.

Even idyllic surroundings, however, can't help all kids unload their baggage. "We've had to drive

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kids home,” says Jen. “Some have threatened to run away.” With a camper-to-staff ratio of about 2 to 1, occurrences such as these are rare. The counselors, all volunteers, provide a level of attention often missing in the kids’ lives, helping to decrease conflicts at the camp. The counselors include high school students (many of them from St. Francis) who are fulfilling community service obligations, as well as adults who want to work with troubled teens. A real measure of the program’s success is the number of former campers who have come back as volunteers after their own graduation from TYM.

At both summer and winter camps, the kids sleep in teepees and cook their dinners over an open fire. During the summer, Tucker leads three five-day backpacking trips, two for boys and one for girls, through the Sierra. The kids learn leadership and survival skills that, the Farrars hope, will serve them well when they return to civilization. This past summer, they also had the chance to practice childcare skills. With a little trepidation, the Farrars brought their infant son Grayson to camp and found that he was an instant hit. “For certain kids, their niche was to take care of their ‘little brother,’” says Jen. Tucker agrees: “Having the baby there was like therapy for the kids. They loved him.”

The Farrars have seen how the outdoor experience boosts kids’ self-esteem and teaches them appropriate behavior, but they also understand

the limits of their program. “We know that five days isn’t going to undo 12 years of abuse,” acknowledges Jen, “so the biggest part of our mission is keeping in touch with the kids after camp has ended.” To that end, they remain engaged with the TYM kids, providing after-school tutoring, clubs, holiday parties and an open line of communication that doesn’t end when teens graduate from the program. Counselors keep in touch, by phone and by mail, with their charges,

providing an object lesson in the constancy of love.

Like Lou Gherig, Tucker Farrar considers himself “the luckiest guy on earth.” Although he dreams of building up his staff, acquiring property in the Sierra and adding programs such as courses on parenting and science education, he would be perfectly happy to find himself doing exactly what he’s now doing 20 years from now. “It’s amazing to me that I’m doing the one thing that I absolutely love,” he says.

“The most important thing that we can do for these kids is to give them our hearts and an open ear.”

Today’s Youth Matter depends entirely on private donations, primarily from individuals. More information about TYM and its programs is available at [tymkids.org](http://tymkids.org). The Sacramento office can be reached at 452-6852.

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