



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL

Volunteers Kris and John Baker pose near Camp Aldersgate's swimming pool. The couple are cochairmen for the camp's annual Aldersgate After Dark fundraiser, an outdoor, laid-back party to raise awareness for the camp's mission.

After Dark lets attendees sample an ill camper's joy

JENNIFER NIXON
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Riding in a canoe on a lake. Fishing. Sitting around a campfire singing.

They're simple things that make long-lasting memories, but for hundreds of children with physical disabilities or illnesses who aren't able to attend traditional summer camps, they're mostly unattainable. That's where Camp Aldersgate comes in.

The camp, affiliated with the United Methodist Church, has offered summer camp opportunities for such children for almost 40 years.

"We offer the only camp for children with disabilities and illness in the entire state," volunteer John Baker says. "We're the only nonprofit that does what we do in Arkansas. If we weren't here, they probably wouldn't be able to do it."

"So many Arkansans love being outside," his wife, Kris, says. "They love fishing and hiking and hunting. For a group of folks who

don't have the ability to do that on a daily basis without overcoming a lot of obstacles, the camp presents that ability."

That love of the outdoors and the desire to give those opportunities to all children are behind the camp's annual Aldersgate After Dark fundraiser. The Bakers co-chair the event with Aimee and Mitch Berry.

By holding After Dark at the River Market Pavilions, the event combines an outdoor atmosphere with raising money and awareness.

"It's kind of in keeping with the camp theme," John explains. "It's more of a relaxed, casual affair that can be more fun and enjoyable to put on than a traditional rubber chicken sort of thing."

"Not that we're opposed to that," Kris says.

So, besides the more grown-up activities like music by Crisis, dancing, auctions and a cork pull (a sort of lottery with wine), guests

See **CAMP**, Page 5D

Camp

• Continued from Page 1D
can stand around campfires and make s'mores.

John remembers "one year it was really cold and people were huddled around the fires, which was fun."

"Show up in your blue jeans," Kris says. "Show up in your Teva sandals or hiking boots."

Of course, if you want to be all dolled up while you stand around a campfire making s'mores or eating barbecue, that's your choice.

This year's auction items include a Bobby Petrino-autographed football, a slumber party and night hike at the camp, a sushi class and a painting by Arkansan Tracee Gentry.

People who've been to the event shouldn't expect many variations from previous years.

"We've had so many people compliment us on the event we haven't wanted to change it much," John says.

Kris sums it up as "food, drink and dancing all in one spot, then kick in a little more to benefit a good cause."

It's a cause that has been around for a long time, but that doesn't mean it doesn't still need a good deal of support.

"Some nonprofits come and go or ebb and flow but through the years, this one is a constant," John says. "It's been able to sustain itself



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Kris and John Baker show off Camp Aldersgate's state-of-the-art cabins. The annual Aldersgate After Dark event Saturday will raise money to continue the camp's programs and summer camp experiences for children with illnesses and disabilities.

through all these years because of people's reservoir of good will to help it."

However, John says, "You still have to make sure people know we can't continue without everyone stepping up and contributing a bit. And that's what this event is designed to do. It's Arkansas' time to step up and show up and have a good time and support the cause of the only place in the state that can do what we're doing."

It's a worthy cause and one that John believes anybody can get behind.

"I've never met anybody

who doesn't believe that children with disabilities deserve some sort of camp environment and to be able to expe-

rience what other children are able to experience every summer."

The party isn't just a chance to raise money, but a way to recruit volunteers as well.

"If you're looking for a cause to contribute your time to, it's a great way to get to know the folks who are involved in a nonintimidating way," Kris says.

And volunteering isn't limited to adults. Older teens serve as counselors and staff members.

"That's the untold story of the camp," John says. "Clearly the children we host are the primary beneficiaries, but of equal importance are the thousands of children who've come through here who've learned from being a volunteer here the worth of all children and what they contribute to our community."

Aldersgate After Dark will be 7-11 p.m. Saturday in the River Market Pavilions. Tickets are \$75. Call (501) 225-1444 or visit campaldersgate.net.