

*(Published in company newsletter)*

Nestled among the rolling hills of the Ozarks, in a postcard-worthy stretch of land along the shores of Table Rock Lake, sits 400 acres of quintessential American countryside. There is natural beauty, yes – as picturesque of a landscape around. But what makes its beauty truly breathtaking is what happens here 10 weeks out of each summer. Welcome to Kids Across America.

Carved out of the woods in southern Missouri, Kids Across America (KAA) is an organization designed to give urban youth a life changing experience via one-week camp sessions each summer. Founded in 1978 by Joe White, Kids Across America sprung from an idea he had to give the last week of each of his “Kanakuk Kamps” sessions to serve the camping needs of urban youth, called the I’m Third Foundation. In a few years, the demand for a camp serving urban youth and adult leaders became so great that the camp expanded and became Kids Across America.

This past summer, over 8,000 children from around the country attended the Kids Across America sessions, spread amongst four separate camps. With an ever-growing waiting list, KAA President Gregg Bettis said that they are looking to expand capacity for 2012 by 800 spots. Beginning in June, KAA hosts seven camp sessions, each lasting a week.

Rent-A-Center franchising, the nation’s oldest franchisor of independently owned-and-operated rent-to-own stores, has been a proud supporter of Kids Across America for close to 20 years. Each year, the company matches half of all donations made by its franchises to KAA, an amount that has exceeded \$833,000 since the first gift in 1993. That year, Rent-A-Center donated \$35,000 to help build the first KAA campsite, which is now KAA1, the camp for campers ages 9-12.

“Rent-A-Center franchising’s relationship with Kids Across America has always been strong, and we are honored to continue our support for this outstanding organization,” said President and CEO Cathy Skula. “The impact on the lives of those who attend these camps is incredible.”

What makes KAA truly stand out is their commitment to staying involved with the lives of their campers all year long. Their impact isn’t limited to a seven-day stretch during each summer; they have taken the necessary steps to ensure that each individual who comes in contact with KAA has the opportunity to continue what they have learned and to have a place to turn to when things are difficult in their lives.

This essential continued interaction is by “Kaleos”, adult leaders who bring campers to KAA and who are out in their communities the other 51 weeks of the year. The Kaleo (which means “called ones” in Greek) program’s mission to “refresh, equip and connect inner-city youth leaders” Some 800-plus Kaleos from over 30 states meet each summer for eight days of camp to prepare them to go back and serve in their local communities.

In addition to the year-round support in the communities of its campers, KAA has also established partnerships with local colleges and universities to provide college placement assistance.

Campers are charged less than 20 percent of the \$800 cost to send them to a session – an amount many take pride in raising themselves. The individual campers employ a bevy of fundraising activities throughout the year to save enough to attend KAA, something Bettis feels gives them a sense of ownership of their time at camp. When they attend the camp with money they earned themselves, he says, each trip means more. They are able to have a goal to shoot for each year, and when summer rolls around, those who reach those goals will have the chance to reward themselves, which is a privilege that is sometimes uncommon in their communities.

“America has a mission field that is growing more desperate and hopeless, literally every day,” said Bettis. “Our urban centers need Kids Across America more today than any other resource, because KAA gives hope. It gives urban kids a vision for growing up, and it gives them a future.”

Since 1990, Kids Across America has had over 98,000 campers and 12,000 Kaleos attend camp at KAA. That’s over 100,000 young people who had the chance to get away from the trials of their day-to-day lives and come to a place where faith, friendship and hope are everywhere. A place that celebrates them and rewards positive actions. A place where they will see trees and green grass maybe for the first time. A place where they can learn lessons which will lead them to a better life.