Within an hour of arriving at camp, Conor's dynamic personality begins to shine. There is no shortage of laughter as everyone settles in for a week filled with good natured pranks and teasing. Conor started attending Kiwanis Camp at the age of 10; he is 22 now and has not missed his week at camp since the first July in 2001. Most of the staff and its returning members are happily greeted with generous hugs, handshakes and pats on the back as soon as they once again meet the smiling eyes on Conor’s face. It truly is like a reunion of old friends gathering together for a fun and adventurous time of sharing and bonding with both old and new friends.

According to his mother, Conor has always been pretty outgoing and friendly, but he did have the usual nerves when he arrived for the first day of camp twelve years ago. When she came to see the Thursday night program and family barbeque, she was told that Conor had recovered from his nerves by Sunday dinner. Happily, it seems that he has enjoyed every second of camp from that first day forward. His mother says that “Conor looks forward to returning to camp the moment his current stay ends. It is the one time of the year he is truly independent of his family. He loves it. Conor is free to have adventures, meet new friends, catch up with old friends and counselors, and share himself with a new group of cabin mates -- all without any judgments.” These reasons are at the heart of what Kiwanis Camp strives to offer every camper and counselor each summer season.

Conor finds great joy in sharing his considerable knowledge of the camp with his new counselor each year. That also includes helping other campers overcome their hesitancy at participating in some of the adventures offered at camp. One of Conor’s favorite activities is the Stream Crossing high above the ground. He loves safely reaching the other side and then declaring to the other campers below, “See you don’t have to be afraid! You can do it!” He will then take his place on the ground and shout encouragement and applaud as each camper in turn makes the same crossing. It was Conor’s third year at camp when he was able to reach the top of the climbing wall and ring the bell! He was so excited that he had met that challenge, he insisted on calling home. His mother picked up the phone and the first thing Conor said was, “Mom, I rang the bell. I did it!”

But by far, Conor’s absolute favorite activity is the Wednesday night dance. The week before camp he starts working on his dance moves. He uses every one of those new dance moves on Wednesday night. He is encouraged by other campers and counselors, and usually can persuade a counselor into competing in a “dance off” with him. The end result can be a split pair of pants along with loads of laughs!
It's immediately clear upon meeting him that Conor is naturally a very friendly, social and chatty young man. Each time he returns from camp his family can see that his confidence level has grown. Everyone at Kiwanis Camp is someone who wants to be there. The end result of this is that the campers are met with encouragement, praise and applause at each adventure or task completion (to their ability) and as stated earlier, face no judgements. It is an extremely important distinction -- one that many campers may only enjoy with family and at camp. Conor's family has seen that every aspect of camp has helped him grow as a person.

Canoeing on the lake brings out the playful trickster side of Conor. He warns everyone that he will rock the canoe until it tips over and he will negotiate with counselors to find the one or two who will happily join him in the water. Another favorite activity of his is the campfire and sing-a-long, which brings all the campers from every cabin together. Conor loves being a part of this community gathering and adding his voice, especially to the "Shark" and "Peel, Peel the Banana" songs, which include hand motions that he really enjoys. He also likes being around and riding the horses. He says he likes to take care of the horses by "brushing them and feeding them apples" and then "the horses are happy" and will "take me for a fun ride". His mother will tell you that his encounters with the horses help enforce the importance of being gentle and patient and caring. She describes Conor as a natural helper and says that camp gives Conor a path to accommodate his natural helpfulness in many ways. "Maybe another camper is nervous about the adventure course, or maybe is a little shy or a camper may occasionally need help getting around in a wheelchair." She says. "Every time Conor can help someone else, it makes him feel better about himself. He takes pride in his ability to encourage and help."

Thursday night is a favorite night for Conor because it is Skit Night. The week before camp Conor will go through all his CDs and then choose a song he wants to sing on Thursday. At camp he will try to persuade his fellow campers and the counselors to let him perform the song he has chosen. His favorite Skit Night ever was the night he got to perform as country singer "Conor Underwood" (singing a Carrie Underwood song) complete with a cardboard guitar and a long blonde wig. His mother still remembers the expression of pure joy on his face. At his most recent camp experience, Conor was instrumental in coming up with the name of his group, "Beautiful Butterflies"! It was great fun developing a skit which included butterflies during our pirate themed week and the hilarity on stage was bountiful.
Conor’s favorite souvenir from camp is always the tie-dye Kiwanis Camp shirt. Although typically arts and crafts are his least favorite thing to do, he loves the shirts that he helps create. When he gets home, he will write on the shirt the date he was at camp, what group he was in, his counselor’s name (sometimes he has already asked them to sign his shirt) and any cabinmate’s names that he particularly enjoyed meeting. His home has a drawer full of shirts with the names of the people who helped make some very nice memories. Finally, his mother says that “the bond that Conor and his counselor are able to form in just one week is nothing short of amazing...and it happens every time. They become his ‘best friend forever’ more often than not, and the feeling is reciprocated. Each of the counselors from the last three years has taken the time to come back to Sandy and visit him at his job on Tuesday afternoon at Sparky’s Pizza. So not only is Conor’s life enriched by the camp and the people he meets, but Conor has also enriched the lives of the counselors who have traveled the week with him through Kiwanis Camp.”

Currently, Conor maintains employment and enjoys it. Conor began training at a local pizza parlor while still in school. He was hired on as a part time worker almost three years ago. He works one day per week for 2.5 hours. Among his duties are greeting guests, cleaning tables and floors, filling up ice and soda machines and making sure all the cheese and salt & pepper shakers are filled. His family reports that Conor has been pursuing volunteer opportunities in the community and has recently scheduled an appointment at a Vocational Rehab Center to receive training so he may obtain other employment opportunities in the community. His high level of responsibility and work ethic were evident each morning at Kiwanis Camp as the counselors sleepily arrive at the cabin to wake everyone from their slumber only to find Conor up, dressed, bed made and backpack ready to go for the day’s activities. They also saw that chivalry is not lost on Conor. He is always the first to hold a door and offer a kind word or support to another in need. His drive and willingness to make the most of every part of his day serves as an example for us all, and all who have the privilege of sharing his space are the better for it.