

## **OEC: Our Star Youth in Action**

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It is so easy to take for granted all the treasures we have among us. One such treasure is a program at both Spring Lake Park and Osseo High Schools called OEC (Opportunities in Emergency Health Care). OEC allows our city's youth not only to shine, but possibly find lifelong direction. While in school, they can take medical classes, such as, Health Careers Exploration and obtain certification in both 1<sup>st</sup> Responder and EMT. Students then are given the opportunity to apply their skills at community and sporting events. Some of these local events that are covered by staff and students are the USA International Soccer Cup, the Anoka County and Hennepin County Fairs, hockey tournaments and more.

In 1976, Spring Lake Park became the first high school in the nation to provide Emergency Medical Services training. OEC began despite protests by many who believed that high school students were not ready for EMT. Since this beginning, OEC has drawn students from as many as ten different surrounding high schools as a magnet program since the first EMT class was offered. In the time since it's beginning, OEC has won seven Minnesota Program of Excellence awards, and a national EMS site award of excellence in education. Students, graduates and staff have won nine state emergency care championships, and over 22 international emergency care and EMT championships. The director and maybe one of this program's greatest accomplishments, is Bill Neiss, M.A., EMT-I who started as a student in 1979 and has been the lead instructor since 1988.

It is not enough to "teach" medicine. To truly learn, you must experience it. The students at both Spring Lake Park and Osseo have outstanding staff leadership that knows the right combination of study and hands-on makes the learning experience and love of medicine come alive. One of the experiences offered to the student to sharpen their skills is Fall Camp. Twice a year, the students are given opportunity to attend camp for five days in Wisconsin at Camp Wapogasset. Most jump at the opportunity to get away. While there, they get to practice their new skills. Often these juniors and seniors get challenged beyond what they believe they're capable through a series of lectures, training and impromptu medical emergencies that "arise" anytime of the day or night.

The mission of the OEC Fall Camp is to increase basic lifesaving skills and increase teamwork through development of role models and relationships with staff, healthcare professionals and student leaders. The expectations are clear for all attending:

- Value me; connect me, include me and challenge me.
- To be in a place where I can learn, share, feel good/safe, and be a part of something.

For a camp like this to occur, it truly depends on the very success of the program. For 29 years, students have been enrolled in OEC. It is estimated that over 1500 students have been trained as EMT's and hundreds have gone out into the community after graduation and worked as EMT's, Paramedics, Firefighters, Police, and LVN's/RN's. Even though OEC staff at the High School came with vast experience and expertise, the camp cannot

happen without volunteers. This is one of those few exceptions when that is not a problem. Those who have graduated and gone into medical or allied medical fields are asked to take time off work and leave their families (just like the dedicated OEC staff) for five days to “give back”. 30 volunteers came to camp from many different careers including: Paramedics, nurses, firefighters and police. For these five jammed-packed days of activities and medical challenges it wasn’t teachers and students, it was teams. That’s what made it work.

Some of the classes the students might have attended were: Splinting and Bandaging, EMS safety (put on by a former graduate of the program just back from serving in Iraq), Geriatrics (sensitivity to the needs of our growing elderly population), Crime Scene (medical personnel responsibilities when responding to a potential crime scene), CPR On- the-Run (having to practice doing CPR in a moving ambulance), Sports Medicine, Self Defense, and Firefighting/ Fire Extinguisher Training.

It is not all work. With the intense information and expectations, there needed to be time to “absorb” and work on other important skills and issues. This too, happens at camp. At one session you might see students throwing wadded up paper at each other for an “ice breaker” to get to know each other. Students seem to especially enjoy the evening of “staff makeovers”. This is where the teachers allow the students to “give it their best shot” in making them over. The results were nothing less than hilarious. Once this task was completed, they were asked to prance around to be voted on for the “best of show”. OEC Olympics is where students might find themselves in a game of needle darts, a full bedpan relay or maybe racing a gurney for their team. All staff and students eat together. Communication is fostered. But sometimes lunch isn’t as relaxing as the students want. You never know when someone might come running in the cafeteria yelling for help. This time it might be a two car wreck with multiple victims that just occurred outside the building. In a heartbeat, the students jump into action. In moments, the fully moulaged (to make a victim look realistic with fake blood and makeup) victims in the vehicles and those thrown are being effectively cared for by the students. Then as though nothing ever happened, it is back to lunch for them all!

In the evenings when all have put in a full day, there are motivational speakers. People with strong, yet positive messages come to speak about keeping yourself emotionally and physically well as helping others. The basic message is, if you are part of the problem, then you can’t be part of the solution.

Just when the students (and teachers!) think they can’t possibly do anymore, all are sent to their cabins for a well-deserved rest. Lights out! While they are sleeping, staff works out the diabolical details of some major incident to pull on the slumbering students. On the last night, when skills have dramatically improved, they plan a plane crash on the beach of the nearby lake. Quietly one half of the students are awakened and moulaged to look like victims of a major plane crash. Three leaders volunteer to be seriously wounded victims hanging from a tree near the lake. The plan is set. The leaders go back to camp and wildly announce that there has been a mass causality plane crash and their help is needed. Only quiet moans could be heard while shoes and jackets were quickly

put on. All mobilized, they went to get their emergency medical equipment and get to the site of the downed plane. In the moonlight of early morning, came 50 flashlights lugging medical bags, backboards and blankets to the sounds of countless screaming victims. A daunting challenge to most, OEC students rose to the occasion. Within minutes, the victims were assessed, prioritized, bandaged and packaged for transport, including the three injured hanging in the tree.

*Why does a student sign up for these classes or attend camp? The students themselves answered:*

**Joshua (home schooled) Totino-Grace-**“ I went to camp because I had always heard of how great an experience it had been for others in the past and my experience far surpassed my expectations. My favorite experience was the team building. It showed me when everyone focuses on a single task almost anything can be accomplished. The most difficult thing was rotating moulages because of the many things I had to remember from the classroom. I would recommend this class to anyone interested in the medical field because of the vast amount of exposure to the entire field through this class. In this class, we are able to see and work alongside paramedics, nurses, and EMTs. I am positive that the skills that I have learned will be with me for the rest of my life.”

**Catherine, Spring Lake Park-**“Camp last year was a blast, and this year was even better. After camp you become family with everyone. My favorite experience was getting to do moulages, and also the search and rescue. I would recommend OEC camp to everyone in a heart-beat. You come back from camp with tons of friends and memories that last a life-time. Because of this experience, I am applying to college and entering the nursing program.”

**Nikki, Totino Grace-**“I went to camp basically just to work on skills. I figured I could get experience there that I couldn't get anywhere else other than working with actual patients. The Interns (2<sup>nd</sup> year student leaders) of the program said if I did not go, I'd be missing out on something incredible. My favorite experience would have to be the scenarios. They were so real and even though I knew it was all makeup I was seeing, it felt like I was actually saving someone's life and making a difference to them. The most difficult part was the sleep deprivation. It's not easy to wake up at one a.m. in the morning, but when you realize that you are waking up because somebody needs you; it makes it just a little bit easier. The whole experience of camp changed me. Before, all I heard was the OEC was one big family, but I didn't feel like apart of it. It felt like just a class to me. Now, I understand where the family aspect comes from. You work with these people literally day and night and you come to understand each other like someone outside of the program can never imagine. I would DEFINITELY recommend OEC camp to everybody. You go to camp knowing the facts, but you come back with the experience. You've actually worked on some “patients” without the fear of messing up because it's not a life-threatening situation and the instructors are there to guide you. I know that if someone needed me, I would jump right in. OEC camp gave me the confidence to put the facts I've learned into action. I am more likely to go into a health career. I want to be a paramedic because, after saving someone, you have this overwhelming feeling of accomplishment. Camp makes you grow up and take on responsibility. I know that people will be putting their lives into my hands and it is the most amazing feeling to know that people trust me with their most precious gift.”

**Lindsay-** “I went to camp because even though its time out of my weekend, it’s like any family up there. It was my first time not wearing my wig after cancer and I had fears about being judged in any way. I enjoy feeling in control in emergencies and the adrenalin rush I get when I get to be the teacher my second year, and help the new students learn as much as I did. The Self-Defense class changed me because I realized that I had the ability to defend myself and Bill (Neiss) showed me by example how a girl should be treated and never to let anyone take advantage of me. Of course, I would recommend OEC to my friends; I still encourage everyone I know to take the class. It not only teaches me about emergency situations but also about how to live my life and interact with people. Once the medical field was introduced to me in this class, I immediately knew that I was meant to be in it in some way and any level.”

**Anonymous-** “From this experience I would be more likely to go into the medical field now. It showed me how it can happen and that I really want to help real people!”

If you are ever in an incident and are in need of medical care, look up, it might be a graduate from the OEC program helping you. Recognize the treasure in front of you and don’t forget to say, “Thanks”.