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UK camp ignites youth's interest in insects

By Katie Pratt

LEXINGTON, Ky., (Aug. 12, 2009) – Incoming University of Kentucky freshman Tyler Nelson had no idea she was passionate about insects until she attended the Kentucky Forest and Entomology Leadership Program two summers ago. Now, she shares her love of bugs as a camp counselor at Camp Shalom, the Central Kentucky Jewish Federation's summer camp.

"The most exciting thing for us is when somebody like Tyler comes to our camp, doesn't know that much about insects, and leaves with enough knowledge to go teach it to someone else," said Blake Newton entomology extension specialist in the UK College of Agriculture. "To me, that's one of the true aims of extension-- to send out people, almost like an army of teachers, who can go out and spread more knowledge."

The Kentucky Forest and Entomology Leadership Program is a week-long, overnight camp where UK forestry and entomology specialists teach high school students about issues in entomology and forestry. Campers choose their area of concentration, but by the end of the camp, they have a better understanding of both subjects and their relationship in nature. In addition to forestry and entomology, the campers learn about many other environmental topics from UK and state specialists in areas such as water education.

"These young people have some interest in nature and come to us with a background in basic biology," said Doug McLaren, UK extension forestry specialist and camp coordinator. "At this camp, they have an opportunity to see how everything is integrated together and how one thing affects another in nature."

Camp participants who attend one section of the camp may want to attend the other next year. Nelson attended both and was attracted to the study of insects after she learned about the vital roles they play in nature.

"If you think about it, bugs are a lot different than anything else," she said. "They live almost everywhere in the world and eat anything. If they died, we would have a huge, catastrophic breakdown of every system on Earth."

Currently, she teaches about 80 young people at Camp Shalom about Teva, or nature. Using materials she has amassed, she teaches campers how to use a microscope and collect

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insects and other creatures at the campsite. Each of the past two years, she has invited Newton to talk to the campers about insects and bring UK's insect zoo for them to see.

Campers learn about Teva in the morning, and then some participants elect to attend a more in-depth session in the afternoon. Even though it only began four years ago, Teva quickly became the most popular elective among Camp Shalom campers.

"Tyler has a lot of enthusiasm, and she sparks the campers," said Jana Lazur, activities director for the Central Kentucky Jewish Federation and Camp Shalom.

"Tyler had an interest in nature and wanted to take advantage of the natural environment of the camp," said Kathy Feinberg, Camp Shalom director. "So she went out and caught things in the stream and brought back bugs. She was like the pied piper, the campers just followed."

The Kentucky Forest and Entomology Leadership Program is open to high school students who have completed their freshman year. While this year's Kentucky Forest Entomology Leadership Program has already occurred, it's not too early to think about next year's camp, which is scheduled for May 31 through June 4 at the Lake Cumberland 4-H Educational Center in Jabez. The camp is limited to 25 campers and spots are filled on a first come, first serve basis. Interested individuals can contact McLaren at 859-257-7203 or Newton at 859-257-7453 with any questions about next year's camp.

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