

tobyMac Meets Christ at Camp

Why Camp Is the Best Place for Students to Meet Jesus

By Jessica Robin

tobyMac's childhood memories of camp are joyfully cherished.

As he recalls his summer trips to basketball camps in the Poconos, golf camps in North Carolina, as well as various church-related camps, his face lights up and he smiles as the nostalgia sets in.

One particular memory, when he won a trophy for choir directing, prompts laughter and the comment, "Man, this is old school! I wonder where that thing is now." Probably covered with dust in an attic somewhere—although one could imagine its ironic placement next to his Grammy awards, Dove Awards, and gold and platinum records.

Summer camp feels a world away from tobyMac's hectic life in Nashville now. He's a husband to wife, Mandy, a father to five children, a record label executive, and still a frequently touring and recording artist. Last February he released his third solo album, *Portable Sounds*, and he's also well-known for his contribution to Christian music as a member of *dcTalk*.

'Birthed' at Camp

Whether it's the rock-rap sounds of "Jesus Freak" or the melodic pop of tobyMac has influenced and encouraged youth all over the world through his music—and the ministry he lives out today was birthed years ago, at his first trip to summer camp. "Made to Love," tobyMac has influenced and encouraged youth all over the world through his music. And the ministry he lives out today was birthed years ago, at his first trip to summer camp.

Although he'd been attending church with his parents from a young age, tobyMac hadn't yet made a decision to follow Jesus. The summer before he turned 13, a youth leader invited him and some of his friends to camp.

"I went because I wanted to play sports," he admits. "He talked about all the stuff we'd do there, but I just heard 'basketball.' That was the draw for me."

Of course, he remembers having fun with his friends, hearing preaching. It was the late nights spent in the cabin with his group of friends and the youth leader that really made a lasting impression. And yes, playing sports, but it was the late nights spent in the cabin with his group of friends and the youth leader that really made a lasting impression.

"Mainly I remember that youth leader hanging out with us and being real with us," he says. "I just remember how that affected me—how I felt like he was like me—as opposed to a preacher wearing a suit and standing behind a pulpit, which intimidated me. But he was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, sitting on the floor with us, sharing, opening up God's Word, and talking about life. It wasn't too formal, it wasn't intimidating—it was inviting."

And in that cabin, tobyMac made the life-altering decision to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is the essence of his

testimony, which he's shared with countless audiences over the years at music festivals, crusades, and concerts. And while tobyMac doesn't make it a point to recount his testimony word-for-word each time he's onstage, he's also not the type of artist who lets the "music speak for itself."

Proclaiming the Message

At a tobyMac concert, you can expect to hear the gospel message in one form or another, whether through a Scripture passage, sharing what God has taught him, or simply letting folks know that Jesus loves us and calls us to love others. Regardless of the circumstances of the show, tobyMac is constantly aware that his audiences consist predominantly of believers in Jesus, yet he knows there's always the possibility that some are hearing the gospel message for the first time or just haven't yet made a commitment.

"In my set, I have songs that will communicate and open people's minds to who Jesus is for the first time or will open their minds to maybe pursuing him in a deeper, more passionate way," he says. "For the maybe 80 percent who believe, but also for the maybe 20 percent who don't, I'll always offer the hope in Christ that I've found in my life. Because maybe there's someone out there who doesn't know."

With an exciting live performance and a music style influenced by rap, hip-hop, rock, and reggae, a tobyMac concert is a popular event among young people. He and his band, Diverse City, often play at youth-oriented events, conferences—and, yes, camps. Back to his old stomping grounds that set in motion so much in tobyMac's life—clearly camp is close to his heart.

Focusing on the Important

"Camp is important because it gets you away from all the things in life. At a conference or a camp, it can take a few days for all the 'stuff' of life to fall by the wayside, but then you begin to realize what your life is really all about. That's pulling at you," he says. "It takes you out of your normal, everyday circumstances and really focuses you on relationships and on a relationship with God. At a conference or a camp, it can take a few days for all the 'stuff' of life to fall by the wayside, but then you begin to realize what your life is really all about. Like the song I wrote, 'Made to Love'—it's about the moment I realized what my life is really all about. It's about, 'Wait a second—this is what I was made for. Not all that other stuff that is filling up my mind, filling up my heart.'"

"And I think that's what camps do—they allow you to strip everything away that can get between you and God so you can focus solely on God. When you get away from everything, you begin to realize what really matters. Sometimes we get so busy in life that we forget what that's what camps do—they allow you to strip everything away that can get between you and God so you can focus solely on God. really matters. Even as kids, instead of worrying about trying to meet that girl or trying to make the honor roll or trying to make enough money to buy a car or trying to get into a certain college or deciding if you're going to play football as a freshman in high school—all that junk goes away. You're surrounded by a group of people your age who just want Jesus. It makes you realize how much you want him, too."

But doesn't all of that just encourage an emotional high, a mountaintop experience that's quickly forgotten when kids return home?

"Well, I think that's what life is," tobyMac explains. "That camp experience of getting on fire, then coming back and the fire sort of fading slightly—that's no different than a normal day. You wake up, have your Bible study, you pray, you're close to God, and as you walk throughout your day and all the stuff that comes with it, that close feeling starts to end. That's life. And we cherish those moments where we can totally commit our hearts."

After 20 minutes of discussing memories of friends and pranks, playing sports, and just getting away from it all, it's evident that the adult tobyMac is ready to go back to camp.

"And it was fun, period," he sighs wistfully. "I always looked forward to going to summer camp."