

## TALL OAKS CONFERENCE CENTER HISTORY AND INFORMATION FROM MAY 1998 THROUGH MARCH 2015.

Written by Lyle Bracken, Executive Director of the Tall Oaks Conference Center during the above time period, before retiring on March 31, 2015. Tall Oaks is owned and operated by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Greater Kansas City.

Upon arrival at Tall Oaks there was a \$750,000 debt on the new LLC Lodge (Lifelong Learning Center). This was the "adult" retreat center that had 12 housing rooms, a large meeting room, large lounge area, 3 smaller meeting rooms, and a small chapel. Over the next 3 years enough very nice bequests and gifts were received that the debt was fully paid off.

This new building was the cornerstone of Tall Oaks becoming one of the premier camp/retreat centers in the Kansas City/Lawrence area, as well as being one of the nicest operated by any Disciples of Christ Church Region.

Upon my arrival eight of the 12 rooms had a twin size bunk bed and a twin bed and the four accessible rooms had a bunk bed and a full size bed. After evaluation one of the first things we did was to eliminate the full size beds and add twin beds so each room had a bunk bed and two twin beds. This raised the capacity from 36-40 to 48 individual beds.

Also, upon my arrival work had begun to remodel Delaware Cottage. The funds and upgrades were sponsored by Virginia Reed and supervised by Harley Webb and members of the Country Club Christian Church volunteered as well as donated to this cause. Virginia and Harley and Country Club teamed up to remodel two more cottages in the first few years of my time at Tall Oaks. Shalom and Milagro Cottages.

I will try to go through improvements to the facilities made over my time there. These will not be in exact chronological order.

### LLC (Lifelong Learning Center) LODGE

As mentioned LLC Lodge was fairly new upon our arrival and several upgrades have been done over the years to make the building more usable. One of the biggest was addition of the pull out acoustical door which would seal off the large main meeting room and one smaller room from the lounge area. Many groups use the building with the wall in place and many more like the open area best, so that kept us busy putting up the wall and taking it down.

The main area carpets were replaced in around 2011. Sound systems have been upgraded twice during that time period, and all of the mattresses were replaced also around 2011 (thanks to CWF). The one huge challenge over the years has been the HVAC System. It was a system that was not a good fit for the building and not well installed. It has been a constant challenge.

First of all the four blowers in the main meeting room are way too noisy and we often have to turn off two of them during group sessions. We have worked quite a bit to improve the ductwork and other areas to make them work more properly. In 2014 the main Air Condenser units both went out and we had to replace both units right at the start of summer and had to use temporary units for over a month while that work was getting done. Overall we had to replace those units, overall the air handlers, and replace the computer operating system. This cost in excess of \$70,000 for those major repairs.

Other things like reupholstering some furniture and purchasing new took place. Lounge chairs for the chapel and a donation of bookcases and books from Rev. John Walker of Bonner springs made the chapel a nice place to relax, recharge, and enjoy the holy setting of the Bash Chapel.

When the Delaware Cottage was remodeled this included a new shingle job, new windows, upgraded bathroom fixtures, refinishing the interior walls, new kitchenette cabinets and appliances, new light fixtures, new carpet, exterior painting, new lounge furniture, new wood burning free standing fireplace, and more amenities to make this the most popular dorm style cottage.

Just a note that Ray Fancher, executive Director, previous to me spearheaded the renaming of the cottages from letters like A, B, C, and etc. to the current names. Ray also spearheaded the drive for the LLC Lodge. Because of the debt and etc. Ray was not given much credit for the current success of Tall Oaks. However, when working to get LLC Lodge going he wanted to raise the guest day usage of Tall Oaks from around 6,000 per year to 10,000 per year. It took a few years but now Tall Oaks is operating in excess of 12,000 guest days per year, and LLC is one of the premier retreat centers in the Metro area. All of this because of the foresight of Ray Fancher.

During the early years of my stay. Barb Deaver, Tall Oaks Employee, applied for a matching trails grant from Kansas Wildlife and Parks and much to my surprise it was granted. So with some nice donations we were able to put in a wonderful 6' wide concrete pathway connecting all of the main Tall Oaks buildings. This was to play a major part in getting some groups to Tall Oaks that will be mentioned later.

Shalom Cottage was the next to be remodeled by the Virginia Reed and Harley Webb group. Much the same was done to Shalom as was done to Delaware. Just as a note all of the cottages, Dining Hall, and Office (home) were all built in the 1960s.

Then a couple of years later they did Milagro Cottage. Milagro was important. When we came to Tall Oaks the four rooms at Milagro had two bunk beds and a full size bed in each room. We decided that was too crowded. We decided to make the rooms like the LLC rooms with a bunk bed and two twin beds making the private rooms nearly identical in lay out as LLC. This made Milagro popular in two ways. One was with small groups who desired more privacy, and secondly in combination with LLC Lodge this gave us 16 "adult" retreat rooms or a total of 64 beds in those more private rooms.

At about this same time a group led by Jim and Marie Fisher, of the Lee's Summit Christian Church. Decided that the dorm cottages needed to be air conditioned. Their campaign put all new furnace/AC

units in each of the 6 cottages. This was another addition that was important to adding some important new group usage.

Campbell and Koinonia Cottage have not gotten the full overhaul yet but have had many nice touches. Carpeting, curtains, paint jobs, and new roofs along with upgraded furniture and new roofs. Over the past few years we have been able to replace all of the old (and Gross) foam mattresses in all of the dorm cottages. Funds raised by Regional CWF groups put all new inner spring mattresses on all of the dormitory lower bunks and all of the beds in Milagro. The Mattresses in LLC Lodge were replaced then also. Then in 2014 we were able to replace all of the foam mattresses on the top bunks with nice new foam mattresses.

One change was a complete change of pace for Sojourner Cottage. It had 5 little housing rooms and a bathroom. It was used very little. It was decided that we would upgrade this building for somewhat different usage. We tore out a lot of the walls, leaving 2 small bedrooms. Then opened up the front 2/3rds of the housing areas to the ceiling and made a really nice meeting room in that area. This allowed us to use this building for meetings, guest speakers, personal retreats, and overflow housing. But the most important usage was that we could use it for the summer health center for the camp nurse for our summer DOC camps. We put in some curtain rails and added two beds to the large area during the summer. This gave us housing for the nurse, an examination room with a bed, and two beds for campers, if needed. Besides, that there was still plenty of room for the nurse for lounge and paperwork.

There are 4 tent camping areas at Tall Oaks. Areas 1 & 2 are near the pool bathhouse. Area 3 is near Delaware cottage. And the wilderness camping area Mitaki Oyasyn, is on the outer reaches of the drive a little ways beyond Inspiration Point.

Bob Dougan, Maintenance Director when we came, Kelly Miller Maintenance Director (when we retired), and Marvin Kemler current Maintenance Assistant along with lots of volunteers need a big thank you for all of the work they did for the above projects and many more during those 17 years.

ALL PEOPLE'S DINING HALL: The main portion of the All People's Dining Hall was built in the 60s. This has been a great facility for 50 years, but a larger space was needed both for dining and storm shelter space. In 2011 the Budd Park Christian Church decided to close their doors and sell their building. Over \$200,000 of that was donated to Tall Oaks.

This allowed Tall Oaks to add another dining area attached to the current dining hall that was basically just a little smaller than the older dining space. At the same time this allowed us to nearly double the storm shelter space and add a ramp down to the lower level meeting and storm shelter areas. Up until this time the lower level/storm shelter was not accessible. This also made all of the areas from moderately accessible to very well accessible.

Two changes were made after we arrived. 1. Was to go to a full buffet meal for most of our meal service. This allowed for better choices for individuals, and allowed the choosing of their own portions.

Some groups still are served cafeteria style as the old system. Also, CWF & a few groups want to be served family style. 2. When we arrived there was a small counter for coffee in the far back corner of the dining hall with no water. This made the cooks have to carry water to the coffee makers through the dining area to fill the coffee makers. Not too long after our arrival we moved the coffee area to a corner near the kitchen where a water source could be added for coffee making machines. The last few years this drinks area was expanded with a milk cooler, a coffee grinder, an ice tea machine, and a juice machine along with space for serving desserts as well as storage.

Donations from the Allen Family and the First Christian Church of Olathe allowed T.O. to add a walk-in Freezer and walk in cooler that were much needed. New carpet has been put in all spaces upstairs and new tables and chairs were purchased. The new Budd Park room works great for both dining, if needed, and for meeting space. The old meeting space in the lower level has not changed much but is a nice sized space that can handle up to 100 for group meetings.

In 2013 the State Fire Marshall inspected Tall Oaks for the first time ever. In that process we were ordered to make a number of changes including a new range hood with fire suppressant system and a new main floor boiler system for hot water. There were other items to the dining & meeting rooms, a few in the cottages and several in the LLC Lodge. This totaled right at \$50,000. We had hoped to do some projects with this money but even though it was a shock to have to do that work, it made the dining hall and other areas much safer so that is a good thing. We did have to shut down fireplaces in 3 of the cottages with this situation though.

On the back of the dining hall where the two walk-ins were located along with a small deck for summer staff dining area were in direct sunlight and of course rain and etc. bothered both the dining and cooks going to the walk ins. Tall Oaks Staff designed and built a roof system that covered all of those areas along with a small extension for the cooks to grill.

We had hoped to add an expanded kitchen storage space, but that has not gotten done yet. We have replaced most of the heat/ac units in the older sections of the dining hall and Kenny had the last one on the main floor kitchen replaced the summer of 2015.

Upon our arrival Roberta Christenson was the long time Food services Director and served another 6-7 years. Roberta retired and we hired a young man who did not work out, and Roberta came back out of retirement for a short time to cover until we were able to hire Chef Bill Breen. Roberta was known for her very good meals, her cookies, and her personality in greeting and getting to know customers. Bill was best known for bringing great meals, upscale meals, smoked & grilled foods and super banquet meals to Tall Oaks. Bill resigned just before our departure and Rose Williams, who had been a cook & Director of Housekeeping for over 5 years moved into his spot. Roberta passed away in December of 2015.

Just as a note the Closing of Budd Park CC brought money to Tall Oaks to do this work. During this 4-5 year time period 3 more churches closed and sold their buildings. This is sad for those churches and the

Region but all made nice gifts to Tall Oaks that helped pay for the \$50,000 dining hall fire upgrades, and for the new \$50,000 HVAC system at LLC Lodge. These other churches were Westwood CC, Cherokee CC, and Ridge View CC. There is still money left for seed money for a new, muchly needed, covered activity area to hopefully be built in the next year or two.

RidgeWood Shelter (June 25, 2016) Sharon and I were invited back to Tall Oaks to take part in the new Pavilion. This activity shelter has been in the planning and was Just finally a reality last Spring. It will be a great addition to the facilities at Tall Oaks.

#### MEETING SPACES

INDOOR: Tall Oaks has developed a number of indoor meeting spaces over the years. The lower level of the dining hall was the main indoor meeting room for many years. Then LLC Lodge was added to bring a very nice large meeting room for up to 180 persons as well as 4 smaller meeting rooms. Then Sojourner Cottage was remodeled to give a space for 20 + in a formal meeting area. Then with the addition of the Budd Park addition to the dining hall a really nice room was added upstairs that could be used as either a meeting space or added dining space. The Cottage lobbies are all set up to handle small group meetings. Delaware and Koinonia can handle around 20+, Milagro and Shalom around 16, and Campbell about 12.

OUTDOOR AREAS: Tall Oaks has 3 main areas that are much used. The Matthews Chapel a roofed area with a beautiful native stone altar wall and cross and has seating for up to 70 on benches. The chapel is used for lots of group chapel services, weddings, and other types of uses.

There are two nice outdoor worship and campfire areas. Inspiration Point is located about ½ mile out from the main campus and is used by nearly every DOC camp as well as many others. It sits on the highest point of Tall Oaks on a bluff above the Kansas River Valley. Inspiration Point is a primary site for groups to take a Tall Oaks wagon ride to finish up with a campfire and smores or maybe even a weiner roast. It has bench seating for around 100 and has a wonderful wood cross. Vespers area is much the same in design and usage as Inspiration point, except it is located in the middle of the campus just a short walk from LLC Lodge, the cottages, and the dining hall.

The new pavilion will be a great addition to these outdoor areas.

Tall Oaks has a nice picnic area with 17 picnic tables near the dining hall, and picnic tables spread around the campus for small group outside usage. There are also several benches along the main walkway and some of the nature trails for personal reflection or rest. You can enjoy the wonders of the holy ground of Tall Oaks outdoors at any of these sites.

## ACTIVITY AREAS

Tall Oaks has 3 major outdoor activity/program areas and 2-3 more smaller programs.

### EQUESTRIAN (Horse Programs)

Barb Deaver has been the Equestrian Program Director since before we came to Tall Oaks and still supervises the program along with other administrative tasks. Tall Oaks has a normal herd of 10 horses and a new stable was built from funds provided by the Lee's Summit Christian Church. Barb has developed a wonderful program that works with all ages and all skill levels from led horse rides for the youngest, to arena riding and basic horse training, to trail riding. 3 of the Disciples summer camps are geared toward extensive horse training. These programs build in a lot of time with the horses but also remembers that kids are there to get spiritual growth as well as have some other fun.

Most of the horses that are at Tall Oaks or that have come and gone during our 17 years there, came to Tall Oaks as donations. That is all except one. Spring, our paint horse, was born at Tall Oaks and has spent her entire life here. We also, had three horses that we received as a donation from the Fort Riley mounted cavalry reenactment group. They were neat horses. All 3 had US brands on them and all were originally wild horses.

### CHALLENGE COURSE

Upon our arrival the Challenge Course at Tall Oaks was not owned by Tall Oaks. It was owned privately by two persons who like to work primarily with corporate groups. And they had a contract with Tall Oaks to use the grounds for that and groups could schedule meals or overnights with Tall Oaks. The biggest problem was that they charged other Tall Oaks groups to present programs to their groups so few if any of the camp groups could afford to do this, so little usage was by Disciples groups.

This lasted about 3 years after we arrived and the owners were not able to make it financially. After some study we decided that we could afford to purchase and operate the Challenge course as a part of Tall Oaks and it has been a great success.

Challenge Course are not just fun and games. These programs are designed to develop problem solving skills, team work, leadership, and self confidence. P.J. Jamison was the Challenge Course Director, while we were there and has been at Tall Oaks for about 8 years. She has developed a top notch C.C. program along with some of the other activities to provide a great school enrichment program which several groups utilize for weekday 1-2 overnight and day groups. All programs are developed to meet the needs of each specific group using the course.

**SWIMMING POOL** - the swimming pool has been the leading summer activity for Tall Oaks since the early years of Tall Oaks. This means the pool is around 50 years old, and has some problems which will need to be addressed in the not too distant future. The pool is still very usable and attractive, the problems are in infrastructure.

When the MDA camp decided to come to Tall Oaks two things were added to the pool. One is a portable ramp to allow wheel chair and accessible access to the pool. The other is a pool heater that is great for the early spring staff lifeguard lessons, but is a requirement for the MDA and ADA camps as well as some others.

The bath house is nearly as old and is in pretty good shape structurally for the building itself. It was built with two large changing rooms and a small lobby with a small storage area. Since I have been there we have utilized some of each end of the building for other purposes.

The North end we put in a nice store room for Challenge course and camping equipment. The South end we put in two rooms one larger than the other. Originally we tried to use that for summer staff housing but was deemed inadequate. Then the larger room was converted into a nature center and the smaller into a room with a refrigerator and a freezer that could be used as snack bar when needed.

We use the bath house as the facility for groups tenting in Tent areas I & II. It is really not adequate for that because of several things. There are not enough bathroom facilities to accommodate some of the larger groups using those areas. Secondly, the sewer line plugs up at least once whenever we have a larger group in and has to be reuttered out. Also many of the kids and adults coming out of the city would like to see a more finished changing area, with not so many Daddy Long Legs.

ARCHERY: When we arrived there was a little archery equipment and when groups requested hay bales were set up out in the meadow for a temporary archery range. Upon our arrival we started looking for a location for a permanent archery range. An area across from Shalom Cottage and in the woods was found. It was a cleared area where dirt had been taken out for other projects. It was flat and sealed off by the woods from people getting to the firing area so we set that up with a web backstop and two straw bale stacks for targets. This area had moderate success. The problem was that although in the woods it was cleared of trees so no shade and protected from breezes so it got extremely hot in this area.

After a couple of years we developed a new area across from the Chapel and near the entrance to the trail leading to Inspiration Point. We cleared out an area back into the woods that opened into the cleared area in that location. Then we put in a back wood backstop and fronted with the web backstop. Three target stacks and a storage shed. Also, purchased new and better equipment. Since this area is in the shade and open to breezes archery has become an important and much used activity for most of the summer groups as well as school groups.

OTHER STAFFED ACTIVITIES: P.J. and her Challenge course crews have developed a very nice nature program. A fishing program where we keep a small pond in the woods stocked with catfish and blue gill. Tall Oaks runs some of the fishing programs. And some of the groups use either their own equipment or borrow ours to run fishing programs. We have worked to have an accessible dock and railings around much of the pond for wheel chair security.

Since our arrival we have added a sand volleyball court, a basketball & activity slab, and more recently a Gaga pit to the existing horseshoe pits, softball backstop, tetherball, and playground equipment. There are also nearly 5 miles of cleared hiking trails in the woods around Tall Oaks.

American Camping Association. Tall Oaks is a certified camp by ACA. This country wide organization provides leadership, training, and many more things to a successful camp/retreat center. Every three years a certified camp has to go through a process of certification. This is a set of standards that has to be met in every area of camp/retreat center operation. This is a lengthy process but does several things for Tall Oaks. Makes sure we are doing everything we can to make the center safe for campers and protect against lawsuits and other problems. This certifies the DOC camping program as well as the center, and both large MDA and ADA camps require facilities they use to be certified with ACA certified.

#### SUMMER CAMP PROGRAM

We have worked with the DOC summer camp program for the KC DOC Region, these camps are administered by the Camp & Conference Committee of the Greater KC DOC Region. This program has camps to work with all ages of kids from Day Campers through Senior High CYF Camps. We started a Grandparent's Camp program where Grandparents can bring their Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade grandchildren to camp. This was so successful that 3 Grandparents camps were completely full for 2015. Sharon started directing one of the Grandparent camps when our 3 grandkids were in Kindergarten. She has continued working with a camp (although she says 2016 will be her last as a director). Those 3 grandkids are graduated or in college this fall. We do have 2 more grandkids who are in Kindergarten and 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade. Sharon would like to bring them from Tennessee to a grandparents camp.

Overall Tall Oaks offers 17 different summer camps. Another new camp added a few years ago was the "Eighters" Religious Human Sexuality Camp. This has been a successful camp for those just completing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Tall Oaks has become a site for several special needs camps. We have had two larger camps the past few years. The MDA Camp, which is when the sidewalk and accessibility is at its largest need. MDA bring about 70 kids, 70 counselors, and several administrators, nurses, and Doctors. For a total of around 180 campers for near a full week.

The American Diabetes Association has been bringing near full capacity for nearly a week of kids with diabetes, their counselors, and medical staff. Our Food Service Director has worked closely with the nutritionist from ADA to make sure the kids get the proper foods and learn how to select foods that fit their needs.

Tall Oaks has hosted camps for autism-asperger kids for several years and have had two of those camps the last few years. Other special needs camp using Tall Oaks have been for sickle cell anemia, Foster kids camp, camp for kids who have gone through traumatic losses, epilepsy camp.



## STAFFING

Tall Oaks has had a year round staff of around 11 (several full time, and some part time during the winter), along with 3-4 seasonal staff who work from March through mid November. Then in summer are added several full time summer adults in the kitchen, and 8-9 summer staff who are students who fill rolls as lifeguards, challenge course instructors, equestrian staff, office staff, and help out in the food service, custodial, and maintenance areas. A total of around 30 in the summer.

Over the years there have been oh so many staff that have made fantastic contributions. Just in our 17 years we have seen hundreds of cooks, food service workers, housekeepers, custodial, and summer staff and although I would like to mention them all there are too many to do so. A big Thanks to all of the paid staff and the volunteer staff who have made Tall Oaks successful.

The original Director's home was converted several years ago into the main offices for the center. An area on the lower level was converted to housing for up to 5 staff, and a room on the upper level has been used for summer housing and housing for group speakers, and etc. We moved a double wide manufactured home to Tall Oaks in 1998 and it was a wonderful home for us for our 17 years at Tall Oaks. Kenny and Marlene Funk and their family have moved into this home when Kenny was appointed as the new Executive Director.

There are two mobile homes on the site. An older one that is currently used by the Maintenance Director, and a second which has been used by live on site administration or summer staff housing. Wilbur Christenson is still in their mobile home on the site. The Board approved that they could stay there since they brought in their own home when they came to Tall Oaks and were the basic year round caretakers and food service director. For a time they were the only administrative staff living on site. Their agreement is that when they can no longer live at Tall Oaks that those buildings will come to Tall Oaks. Two things have happened since we retired. The first makes us sad, Roberta Christenson passed away unexpectedly last December. And the oldest mobile home was taken out of service since it was in bad shape.

HOLY GROUND: Camp settings have long been a location where pastors have received their calling to Ministry. There are two current Senior Pastors in the KC Metro Region of the Christian Church who we claim as our own. Ryan Motter, and Kassie Smith. They were campers when we came to Tall Oaks, were counselors at camps, worked as summer staff persons, and are both currently active as camp directors. Ryan is the current Chair of the Tall Oaks Ministry. Many more of our pastors and camp leaders have gone through similar experiences either here at Tall Oaks or other church camps around the country.

## WONDERFUL SUPPORT GROUPS.

Our 17 years at Tall Oaks was fantastic and several groups have made this possible.

The Region and the staff of the Region along with all of the ministers and lay leaders.

The Tall Oaks Ministry has been a wonderful support group over the years. Giving me leadership, advice and direction. This group has been made up of 6-10 members who have added

greatly to the success of Tall Oaks. Originally they were appointed to kind of oversee where we were financially when we arrived at Tall Oaks, but developed into a wonderful support group we could look to for leadership and support.

The Tall Oaks Gala Steering Committee. This group has been fantastic over the past 17 years in providing a wonderful fund raising effort for Tall Oaks each Fall. This benefit Dinner, silent auction, and live auction has proved from \$40,000 to over \$50,000 each year to support Tall Oaks operations and is one of the main reasons Tall Oaks has been in the black overall for the past 16 years. This is tremendously hard work to put on this type of event and the work of those who have participated, some for nearly my full time here, is greatly appreciated. The current group began in 2000 with many members over the years. In 1998 a group of folks primarily from Country Club CC suggested and ran a Gala that many thought would not be worthwhile. At one of my first Regional Board meetings they brought a check for over \$27,000 making it a whole lot worthwhile.

Two Persons during that time have provided more for myself and Tall Oaks than anyone could imagine or could be expected.

George Saller has been a wonderful role model and supporter to Tall Oaks and myself. George has been a member of the Tall Oaks Committee the entire time I was the Executive Director. He was a driving force in getting the Gala going again in 2000 and been on the committee every year. George became a mentor and inspiration for me.. He has also helped with his financial reports projecting where Tall Oaks will go financially on a yearly basis and compared to previous year. This was an important tool for me, and he sent it out to a lot of leaders of the Region for them to see where we were at. No one will probably know how many other ways George has been a blessing to Tall Oaks.

Linda Carlson also has been super important to my ministry at Tall Oaks. She also has been an inspiration to us. Even though with some increasing health problems which finally caused her to have to drop out of some of her work for Tall Oaks last year, Linda also was a member of the Tall Oaks Ministry from the time I arrived, and along with George and some others she was a driving force in restarting and sustaining the Gala.

TALL OAKS DIRECTORS (This is an incomplete list and I would like to be able to update this if anyone has knowledge of who and/or when others served).

Ivan Matthews. Original Director of Tall Oaks when it began operations in 1961.

Ray Fancher. ? to 1997

Don Dunn ?

Blue Ribbon Panel 1997-1998

Don Williams

Rick Lance

Wayne Heady

Lyle Bracken 1998-2015

Kenny Funk 2015\*Present