Introduction

Background

The Strength for the Journey Camp began as a one-week event serving the Los Angeles area in 1988, sponsored by the AIDS Task Force of the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church. From the beginning it was envisioned as a secular effort to provide a respite, support, and caring for persons living with HIV/AIDS. To this point, most of our campers are on disability, SSI or some other fixed income and cannot afford a vacation. It was started by a Methodist Minister who was himself HIV positive. In 1989, the program grew to two camps, one in San Diego and one in the Los Angeles area, and in 1993, the Long Beach/Orange County camp began. Several other camps have been started around the country since that time. In 1992 the Desert Southwest Conference hosted the first retreat in Arizona. HIV Caring Ministries organizes the Arizona Strength for the Journey Retreat. The retreat planning group, including those who are affected and infected by HIV, seeks to embody the Church's role of compassion and love in this epidemic.

Strength for the Journey (Arizona) was founded in 1992 when there was little hope for people with HIV/AIDS. Strength for the Journey realizes that many people with HIV/AIDS are in need, are hard pressed to be able to afford a relaxing weekend getaway. The founders truly believed, as we do today, that camp offer opportunities for them to enjoy new-found independence, meet people like themselves and make new lifelong friends, and experience the wonder of summer camp. How much more would a weekend of camp mean to a person living with HIV/AIDS who often has other health issues? How much more would a retreat benefit a person with HIV/AIDS in financial need than sitting at home with nothing to do?
Overview

Building a new Retreat

This guide is designed to inform you of the entire process of the retreat from start to finish. Our retreat is already going so you are likely stepping in at some point in the process but this guide is also designed for other conferences wishing to start their own retreat.

The first thing that needs to happen is to gauge interest in the conference and willingness to support the effort. A good place to start is a welcoming or reconciling congregation. You will need to assemble a planning team that can help guide the process. You should include people from within the conference as well as people from area HIV Service Organizations and people from the HIV community as well.

You should also work with the Director of Camp & Retreat Ministries to find out pricing and available Camps or Retreat Centers as well as the minimum and maximum number of campers. Obtain pricing that is inclusive of any room and board, meals (some may not include meals or kitchen staff so you will need to account for this) and any activity fees that they charge. You will need this to develop your camper fee. We include a t-shirt that we have printed with SFTJ and our logo for the campers. Many choose to tie dye their shirts in the workshop. We also include the cost of any workshop supplies (Arts and Crafts are the largest expense). Our costs generally run $15 to $20 a camper. Some of the other costs that need to be included are credit card processing fees charged by the Conference office, postage, mailing supplies, flyers and advertising. We use a webpage on the conference website and have found that it is more efficient to register campers online. We allow our campers to make multiple payments but that depends on the capabilities of your conference camp system.

Once you determine all of the costs you should decide how many days your retreat will be and which days of the week. Consider that the first and last day generally are partial days. We do a four day retreat which is only two full days but the more days your retreat is the more it costs the campers.
Scholarships

Many of our campers are on disability or very low income. Many have a hard time paying the full amount. We work throughout the year soliciting donations and applying for grants. This has been harder each year and I would advise to start off charging the full amount and offer limited hardship partial scholarships as you are able to offer them. In previous years we have had more money but this year we are requiring our campers to pay a minimum of half of the camper fee. Other retreats receive more grant money and are able to be more generous. Our campers do not have to apply they simply check that they need a partial scholarship and enter the amount they are able to pay (over the minimum). You may wish to have a scholarship form, essay or some other process. Your group will need to determine your criteria and process for your retreat but it should be transparent and fair.

Staffing

You will want to start planning on the staffing for your retreat. Staff will need to pay the same as campers and you will need to find out what services your retreat center provides (ours includes a cook, kitchen staff, they empty the trash and take care of any maintenance issues). If not you will need to account for this and you may need a licensed food handler. You will want to include a nurse on staff. The nurse primarily handles any medical emergencies that arise. Our campers complete a health questionnaire as part of their paperwork. They pass out any over the counter medicines, treat any wounds and check on any sick campers. The nurse is also a great person to have talk with campers one on one as this is one of the main roles our staff play. Our campers all seem to want someone to talk to and this is one of the things that mean the most to our campers and staff. You should prioritize additional staff by what they can bring to the table. You will likely want to do campfires and a staffer that can play the guitar or lead in songs is a great addition. They may
also lead a workshop or assist in the arts and crafts hall. Your staff members will need to be able to help out where it is needed. You will also need to find staff members to lead any other workshops and you should include at least 2 or 3 progressive clergy on your staff. It is good to have one clergy member acting as the Chaplain. This person will generally lead the opening and closing ceremonies and help out where needed but their primary role will be to connect with the campers as many need someone they can talk to.

**Religion and Spirituality**

We strive to make all of our campers regardless of their religious beliefs (or lack of) feel welcome. We make a point to ask people of different faiths as well as non believers say a prayer, poem or blessing before our meals. We have had Native Americans offer a traditional blessing then explain the meaning in English, we have had members of the 12 step group recite the Serenity Prayer as well as more traditional prayers. We try to pick campers of different beliefs and allow them to say what speaks to them. All of our workshops are optional and we do offer 2 or 3 religious or spiritual workshops among the others that campers can choose to attend. They are very popular and we try to keep them interesting and enlightening. We make it clear from the start that the retreat is sponsored by the United Methodist Church and that we have clergy there that they can talk to as well as any staff members but don’t set any formal time or process as it campers will gravitate towards staff they feel most comfortable talking to. Again, the goal is to make our campers feel welcomed and comfortable. Our HIV Caring Ministries not only puts on the retreat but we have a quarterly dinner for people with HIV at a one of the local Methodist Churches that is convenient to the majority of campers. This dinner allows us to keep in touch with our campers throughout the year and allow potential campers to get to know us. This is a good place to start before your first retreat as the dinners are relatively inexpensive and you can usually find church members who are willing to make food or businesses who are willing to sponsor a dinner.
Mission and Description

The Mission of Strength for the Journey is “A respite from the world; to gather and create a community that is safe, loving, and caring. The overall emphasis will be on celebration of life and appreciation of the beauty and joy of living.” The retreat gives us the opportunity to focus on our own personal life journey and to explore ways in which we might enrich and strengthen ourselves.

There will be blocks of time for: Discussion Groups * Hiking * Music * Relaxation * The Salon * Crafts * Interest Activities * 12-Step * Eating * Massage * Napping and more. There is a NEW professionally built challenge course with both low and high ropes elements. The challenge course is built on and around a tower with interior spiral staircase, and includes various challenges and zip lines. Opportunities for prayer, meditation and worship too. Throughout the retreat there will be a number of opportunities for spiritual journey enhancement through “Celebration of Life” opportunities. All workshops are optional.

In addition we have the following group activities:

Talent Night - You have talent! Let it shine! Whether it is serious or silly, solo or a group production; start planning your segment of the big talent show.

Party Night - One year's party theme is “Prom Night, an evening of sparkle and glamour”.

Night Owl Cafe - Open every evening just for fun – games, snacks, videos, and conversation. A time to kick back, relax, play a game and visit. Chicken Foot (a domino’s type game) is on the agenda – so come prepared!

Arts & Crafts - Time to let your inner child play and create in an unstructured environment.
**Strength for the Journey**

**Tentative Retreat Schedule**

**Thursday**

1-3 p.m. Registration *(You MUST arrive by 4 p.m. or may be asked to return home.)*
4:00 p.m. Orientation/Group Photo
5:30 p.m. Supper
6:30 p.m. Campfire - Bring your ashes
8:00 p.m. Night Owl Café *(Videos/snacks/conversation/games)*
11:00 p.m. Camp Quiet

**Friday and Saturday**

7:00 a.m. Yoga/Thought of the day
8:00 a.m. Breakfast
9:15 a.m. Workshops/Hiking
10:15 a.m. Break
10:30 a.m. Workshops/Hiking
11:30 a.m. Break
12:00 p.m. Lunch
12:45 p.m. Small groups meet
2:00 p.m. Workshops/Optional Activities: crafts, games, reading, affirmation notes, conversation groups, snacking, sleeping, hiking, meditation.
4:00 p.m. 12-Step Meeting
4:30 p.m. Staff Meeting
5:30 p.m. Supper
6:30 p.m. Campfire
7:30 p.m. (Fri./Sat.) “Fairy Tales” Party / “Talent” Show
9:30 p.m. Nite Owl Café
11:00 p.m. Camp Quiet

**Sunday**

8:00 a.m. Breakfast
9:00 a.m. Healing Service, Communion
and collection of ashes at the Fire Circle
9:45 a.m. Clean cabins & pack vehicles
Prepare to leave
11:00 a.m. Have a Safe Journey Home

**Notes about the Schedule**

We have a strict policy that campers must be present for the entire retreat. We believe campers who come a day late do not fully benefit and disrupt the retreat. We obviously make exceptions for campers who have to go to dialysis or similar circumstances. We require that all campers attend the orientation where we introduce the staff, cover the workshops and go over information that will be important to the camp. Our meal times are strict and are set by the retreat center. We have a tight schedule as for a four day camp we really only have two days of workshops and activities.

All of our workshops and activities are optional and campers just show up to the workshops they wish to attend. Some of the workshops and activities are limited in size and for some of the more popular ones such as massage we have to do a sign up or even a drawing if we have limited space for popular a very workshop.

We try to keep all of the workshops along the lines of what you would find at a Summer camp and take the campers minds off their illnesses for a brief few days. Popular workshops are Yoga/Meditation, Arts and crafts workshops (tie dye is very popular), Photography, Unmasking, Zip line, Disc Golf, Hiking, Scripture Meditation, Smoothies, You are what you eat, Journaling. Our most popular are the hair salon, massage therapy and the arts and crafts workshops.
Sample Workshop Descriptions

Yoga - This is a one hour experiential workshop. Learn to relax and heal your body through a variety of yoga postures. Wear comfortable clothing.

Journal Writing - This is a one hour experiential workshop. Readings from favorite text and poetry are presented. After, there will be a time to write whatever comes to you and have a time to share if you desire to do so.

Scripture Meditation (aka “lectio divina”) - This is a one hour workshop. Christian meditation practices are not well-known, yet in fact there is a treasure chest of resources for those who want to grow deeper spiritually in the Christian tradition. “Scripture meditation” or “lectio divina” is one such practice, developed over 1500 years ago. This workshop will teach you how you can make this a meaningful part of your spiritual life, regardless of your theological beliefs.

Photography - This is a one hour experiential workshop. Learn to step into the light, prevent flare-ups, a new angle on life, cut the clutter and more with both picture and video.

Disc Golf - This is a one hour experiential workshop. It is played like traditional golf, instead of clubs and balls, players use a flying disc or frisbee. A player progresses down the fairway making consecutive throws and there is basket and hole completed. No experience necessary for a FUN time.

UnMasking Ourselves - This is a two hour experiential workshop. Make an image of your face using plaster craft through the actual process of mask making.

Hair Salon - No appointments needed. You have the opportunity to work on arts & crafts, affirmations while you wait…

Massage Therapy - Experience a 30 minute therapeutic massage in the peace and tranquility of Mingus Mountain. Please be sure to keep your appointment!

Please note that this is only a partial list of workshops. We typically have 3-4 workshops campers can select at each of the workshop times. We offer a few structured Arts and Crafts workshops in a different area from the Arts and Crafts hall.
Mechanics

Pre-registration

We have campers register online via the Conference Camping website. In prior years we made trifold fliers that we passed out and campers would fill out the pre-registration form and mail it in with a deposit. It is a good idea to set a deadline for all monies to be paid. This will also be the last day to cancel with a refund. You will want this deadline to be before you have to give notice to the Retreat Center/Campground of your final count. We allowed campers to mail in multiple payments as many are lower income. We also offer partial scholarships but you may not have the funds to do this initially. We factor in $20.00 per person to cover additional costs for the retreat such as a t-shirt, workshop supplies, party and talent show expenses, postage and copying...

After campers are registered, we send them a confirmation letter/email with additional information and let them know when they should receive a packet with details such as what to bring to camp, information on transportation/car pool arrangements and a health form that they will need to complete and bring to camp. You can also include how much they have paid, how much they owe and remind them of the deadline. We keep any money paid if the camper doesn’t cancel by the cancellation date to use for the next year’s retreat; unless it is due to an emergency.

Registration/Check-in

Staff usually arrive 24 hours ahead of campers to get everything ready as well as for new staff to mesh with existing staff. Campers arrive between the given times (we give ours a two hour window to arrive), check in, and pay any money due (if applicable). We generally have refreshments ready for them. We generally have key staff members at each of the check in stations as this is the campers first point of contact. They proceed to the Nurse station where their health form is reviewed and any issues are discussed in a confidential setting.
They then proceed to the photo station where their head shot is taken for their affirmation bag. They are given a name tag to decorate along with their affirmation bag at the decoration station. They then proceed to the t-shirt station. We have t-shirts printed which they can decorate. We ask for their size on the registration form. We also ask area chain pharmacies that have a large HIV client base to donate some “goodie bags” (typically a reusable water bottle, pens, mini flash lights…) and they receive these. They then proceed to the final station where they are given a packet with a map of the camp and workshops, workshop list, room assignments and reminded to be at the orientation.

**Orientation**

Orientation is our welcome and opening of the camp. It is mandatory and we introduce staff, tell campers what to expect, discuss camp rules (including privacy, confidentiality and social media expectations). We let campers know what to do in case of an emergency, introduce the nurse and let them know where to find the nurses cabin/office, who to contact with issues in their cabins…, Q&A and then a group photo (this can be done at a different time).

**Opening and Closing Ceremonies**

It has been a tradition at Strength for the Journey retreats to have an opening ceremony the first night with a camp fire (indoors or out). One of the pastors opens the ceremony then we celebrate those loved ones who we have lost by dumping ashes into the fire. These can be remains from a loved one or ashes from a prior SFTJ retreat. If you are starting a new retreat; contact other SFTJ retreats to get some of their ashes to add in to your fire. We sing campfire songs out of the camp or SFTJ songbooks. We close with a word of prayer then everyone (note all activities are optional) is free to go to the Night Owl Cafe.

We do the same again at the closing ceremony and also offer communion and an oil blessing.