

Preppy or Passionate?

Image isn't always as important as heart

Did Pete's earrings

really nullify his

incredible heart for

kids and camping?



by James Rock

Stevie barely took a breath during the entire three-hour trip home, explaining in great detail all that had happened at Juniors Camp. Eben, his CIT, seemed to come up in every sentence. Eben—and camp—had had an effect on this kid. Stevie's parents couldn't help but be impressed.

Once back home, Stevie disappeared. His mom and dad, thankful for the silence, sank into the couch to watch some television and discuss what to do for dinner.

About 15 minutes later, Stevie, with an ear-to-ear smile on his face, suddenly made a cool grand entrance. But it was a huge chain around his neck—a bike chain he had found in the garage—that quickly caught his mom's attention. Smiles turned to shock, and shock turned into a deep philosophical discussion.

That discussion turned into a call to camp. Stevie's parents were angry.

It's a comforting thing for parents to

have their kids cared for by a counselor who wouldn't look out of place at Harvard. But Eben did not have that "all-American look": nice shirt, short hair, no piercings, and no tattoos. He would have fit in much better at a junior biker convention.

That one phone call from Stevie's parents started a wave of commotion that resulted in several e-mails, multiple lengthy board meeting discussions, and several new policies.

Eben wasn't the only one who didn't quite fit the "Christian mold." Pete, one of the best summer staff members I have ever worked with, had a heart for kids, adventure, and camping that was second to none. He was thinking about going into camping full-time. I wanted him to come back for his fifth summer, but he wanted to try another camp that year. It was the right thing to do, but I was devastated.

A few days later, he called to tell me he would be coming back. I couldn't believe it.



The camp he was looking at had an “all-American look” policy, and Pete had three earrings.

While I was doing cartwheels inside, I wondered if that camp had any idea of what they had just missed.

To be honest, I am the biggest prep-py from the class of '88 there ever was. The idea of me personally having a tattoo is about as valid to me as the idea of jumping off a bridge. I simply don't get it. But does that mean it's wrong? Is it a sin? I don't think so.

The reality is that it wasn't Eben's look that put that chain around Stevie's neck; Eben's heart for kids and his real-life witness did. Eben connected with Stevie, and Stevie wanted to be like Eben, even if that meant imitating an off-beat fashion trend.

Are a few phone calls with an upset parent or two really all that important in comparison with a young camper's heart being changed for eternity? Or should I have sent Eben away because he had a necklace that wouldn't match my polo shirt?

And did Pete's earrings really nullify his incredible heart for kids and camping? A camp chose to not even consider having him on staff. Is that wrong? Is that a sin? It might be.

I know at every ministry there must be some kind of standard and every camp culture requires a different set of rules. But the placement of that line in an effective ministry might be closer to Eben's heart and Pete's passion than my personal concern about necklaces, earrings, and tattoos.

In today's world, our camps and conferences must learn to reach out to the kids that I and my “all-American” friends might not be able to reach.

No doubt, regardless of their initial reactions, many parents and campers will ultimately be thankful. ■

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