

# Dave Newhouse: Oakland man finds calling as a summer camp director

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Michael Dobson, top left, rides down the escalator at BART's Rockridge station with his group of...

Summer camp doesn't have the same meaning to Mike Dobson as it did for comic Allan Sherman when he released his now infamous summertime lament.

"Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh. Here I am at Camp Granada," Sherman sang before pleading with his parents to let him come home before camp ends.

Dobson's innovative concept of summer camp life is dedicated to making campers and their parents happy.

Dobson, 34, sees summer camp as a form of education. So he takes his campers to historical and cultural institutions, even where Al Capone did time.

This is a contrary view of normal summer camp activity -- swimming pools, softball games, sack races, marshmallow roasts, pup tents and campfire tales.

Dobson grew up in Oakland with happy camp memories. Then he attended UC Santa Barbara, got a degree in engineering, and thought that would be his life.

But one summer, a buddy who ran a camp needed a mountain bike instructor on Catalina Island. So Dobson took a leave of absence from his engineering work before quitting altogether to take a year-round camp job, teaching physics and astronomy in Idlewild.

He moved up to program director after meeting his wife, Caitlin. Last year, they moved to Oakland, where Dobson decided to run his own camp his way.

"Most camps go to one set facility, with usually one field trip a week," he said. "But what about a camp that brings kids out every day to really cool, awesome places around the bay?"

It will be educational in a sense but making it fun like camp should be. We're going to be showing the kids a bunch of information, but at the end of the day, I want them to go home with a smile on their face.

"It's entertaining education, or 'edutainment.' "

Camp lasts one week, five days a week, but there are four different camps: physics and technology, history, art, and biology and natural science. There are two different camps per week, and the camps run 10 weeks total.

This past week, one group visited Alcatraz on Monday, the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco Maritime Museum on Tuesday, took an Oakland walking tour and saw the California Museum of Oakland on Wednesday, the De Young Museum on Thursday, and the USS Hornet and the Oakland Aviation Museum on Friday.

How unique is this concept? Dobson has spent time on the Internet searching nationally to provide that very answer. He discovered the only thing that comes close is, of all places, right next door in Berkeley with its City Camps.

Dobson's camp kids, ages 8 to 15, travel by BART, ferry, bus and other types of railways. These costs, plus admissions to various sites and two snacks per day -- campers bring their own lunches -- are covered by Dobson's Urban Adventure Camps. Instructors must be paid, too, and there are two instructors per group. Thus a one-week camp costs \$400.

"We're kind of right on the average for private camps," said Dobson. "There are discounts some weeks. Once we get a larger groups of campers, we'll offer scholarships to kids who can't pay the \$400."

To sign up, go online at [www.urbanadventurecamps.com](http://www.urbanadventurecamps.com).

"I don't think they feel pushed or bored," Dobson said of his camp kids. "Most of the time, they're having fun. But, of course, the youngest ones get tired."

Getting off at the Rockridge BART station Tuesday at 4:15 p.m., the camp kids seemed more energized than tired.

"I think this camp is great," said Conor Wayland, 9, of Oakland. "Every day, we go on a field trip, a lot of fun stuff. I barely knew anything about Alcatraz, but I learned about the 'Bird Man' (Robert Stroud) and others who tried to break out but couldn't."

Dobson now wants to make camp life his career. Why not?

