

What's Brewing | SPEC Recap 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Doug Roberts, Jenn Killpack, Jamie Varvaro, Jenn Killpack, Robin Linkhart

Robin Linkhart 00:30

Hello and welcome to What's Brewing, a Project Zion Podcast series where we explore the questions, What is mission? And, why does it matter? I'm your host, Robin Linkhart. And I'm here today with the SPEC 2023 directors team, Jenn Killpack, Jamie Varvero and Doug Roberts, who will share about this year SPEC and how this annual event connects with "Christ's Mission, Our Mission." Hello, friends. Thanks so much for being here today.

Jamie Varvaro 01:07

Hey, thanks for having me.

Robin Linkhart 01:10

Good to see you. So I want to take a minute now. And we're going to listen to your 62nd elevator introduction so to speak so that our listeners can get a sense of who you are. Jamie.

Jamie Varvaro 01:25

Oh, okay. Well start the clock. Here we go. My name is Jamie Varvero, as Robin mentioned, and I am I reside in Columbia, Missouri. My my actual profession is I'm in development and sponsor relations for a music festivals. I'm a little bit in the entertainment industry. And we put up festivals every fall that's that we literally work on all year. So it's it's not only dealing with sponsors and trying to bring money into the festival, but it's also about curating the lineup and that type of thing. So, you know, it's fun. So I enjoy that. I'm also a member here in the Columbia congregation. I'm an Evangelist, and have you know, grown up in the church originally from Northern California. So I'm a I'm a bit of a transplant. So that's, that's me in a nutshell.

Doug Roberts 02:18

Yeah. And my name is Doug Roberts. I live in Lee's Summit, Missouri, I have a wife and two kids. A 13 and 11 year old. I've been a stay at home dad for the better part of the last 11 years. Not what I ever thought I would be doing, but very rewarding and enriching. And I don't think I would change it. If I could go back and do it again. I actively attend an emerging congregation in the Independence area called The Table. I grew up in the church, and have been a church member as long as I know, it's it's woven

into the fabric of my life, been really involved in youth ministry for a long time. And I'm going on year number nine of being one of the CO directors of SPEC.

Jenn Killpack 03:10

And I'm Jenn Killpack. I live in the Kansas City Metro Area. And I work for Community of Christ as Director of Communications. Like Jamie, I'm a transplant to the Midwest, I grew up in Washington DC on the east coast. So still have a little bit of that mentality with me. As I go about my daily tasks. I am also married have three kids, one of whom is married ones in college and one just got their driver's license.

Robin Linkhart 03:40

Wow, that just got their driver's license always feels scary, doesn't it?

Jenn Killpack 03:46

The last one, so I'm kind of excited about not having to be the mom taxi anymore.

Robin Linkhart 03:50

Yes, yes. Today, we want to get a detailed recap of SPEC 2023. But to start things off, we need to set the table so to speak, so that all of our listeners have a sense of what the word SPEC means and Community of Christ. So how would you tell someone who knows nothing about SPEC? What it is? Jamie?

Jamie Varvaro 04:18

Well, you know, SPEC obviously, is short for Spectacular and SPEC has been part of the fiber of the Community of Christ for, you know, over 50 years now. I think we're like 53 or 54 years now. So it's been a pretty big deal. In fact, at one point it was called Sports Spectacular and it's evolved over the years and we've added some more elements, you know, leadership, arts, which includes, you know, both visual and performing arts, sports, about every, you know, a number of different team sports and individual sports that the kids fully officiated scorekeepers the whole nine yards. And then, the worship element. And so, you know, it is I think, arguably the, the number one youth gathering in the Community of Christ. And there's been so much history of those that have been campers in the past that then become staff and and then they see their kids come along and participate as well. So as far as the, as far as the church goes, most people I think, for the most part are pretty well versed in what Spectacular is. But it's more about those that that are outside kind of the Community of Christ bubble a little bit, if you will, because we have special guests, speakers, entertainers, that type of thing that, that come and be part of the Spectacular experience. So sometimes that setup is a little bit different. You know, quite honestly, I think that when I'm talking to some people about coming in, and being part of the SPEC experience, yeah, the description sometimes is a little different, just to not put up barriers, you know, even with some, there are some things that are just supposed if you mentioned that it's, you know, this Christian youth camp, you know, I think what we try to focus on is it's a leadership experience for young people where they get to participate and experience all kinds of different things. And so, in fact, we were kind of chuckling about this earlier, you know, there was one particular individual I had been reaching out to and telling him that it was somebody that we wanted to come and speak and, and tell their story, we do bring in a number of nonprofits that come in and share about their

organization and that type of thing. And so this was this particular instance, and, and as I'm telling him about Spectacular, I'm kind of going about that route about, you know, focusing more on the leadership element, and the performing and visual arts and the sports and that type of thing, and then getting into the Christian foundation through the Community of Christ. And so but as I'm setting up this whole thing I can hear, I can hear the keystrokes in the background. And I kind of chuckled and I said, you're looking me up right now, aren't you? And you're looking up Spectacular. And he goes, Yes, that's exactly what I'm doing. And so it was kind of funny, we got through that whole bit. And he actually did come. And it was, I know, he had an amazing time when he was very, very much welcome into the Spectacular community. And, and so that was really a great experience. But that, you know, time and time again, those types of things happen where people that have no idea about Spectacular and quite frankly, perhaps don't even know that much about the Community of Christ come in. And time and time again, we've had people come in and just say, Man, this is one of the most amazing, amazing youth gatherings we've ever seen or participated in. And so we take great pride in that.

Robin Linkhart 07:51

Thanks, Jamie, Jenn, and Doug, do you have anything to add to that?

Doug Roberts 07:54

Well, as Jamie mentioned, SPEC has been going on for well over 50 years. And it actually moved to Graceland University at the time Graceland college, but now Graceland University, in Lamoni, Iowa, and we utilize the entire college campus. So having shared about SPEC with some non-church people, you know, to piggyback on what Jamie said, it's music, it's sports, it's arts, you know, if there's if there's a space at Graceland University, we try to utilize it for a class or an activity, you know, to provide the campers the richest experience they can which has been a really transition because SPEC started as a volleyball camp, exclusively as a volleyball camp. And it has now emerged and grown into this, you know, event that you can throw a clay pot in the morning, you can make some, you know, glass bead bracelets in the morning and a class and in the afternoon, you can be playing volleyball or softball or basketball or you can do Quiz Bowl or ping pong. And then at night, you can watch a magician and a comedian show up and put on a show. So it's, it's really become this you know, again, this amazing experience. And it's also unique and that the whole day isn't structured. So for campers and having neighbors who are high school kids who've come to SPEC for the first time. They told my wife and I that we undersold how awesome SPEC is which confused us because we told them it could be one of the best weeks of their life. Yet we undersold that so we're we're we don't know we don't know exactly what we have going on. But we know it's awesome.

Jenn Killpack 09:41

I think to like to concisely wrap up what Jamie said and what Doug said, for me, SPEC is about like holistically living. Taking all the aspects of our life and recognizing the sacred in all of it.

Robin Linkhart 09:58

Well, it sounds super exciting. And we've heard a little bit about SPEC. It's been around for over 50 years. I think Jamie may have said 53 in Community of Christ, part of our tradition and started as a volleyball camp and has just evolved into this multi-dimensional holistic event. What I'm interested in now is how did you first get connected with SPEC, Doug?

Doug Roberts 10:27

So I have, I have an older and younger brother. And so my first real experience with SPEC was hearing about it when my brother went. And I grew up in the church, and grew up in Independence, and my parents volunteered on delegation staff. So I knew about SPEC even before I could attend as a camper. But I was a camper starting in 1995. And just the other day I looked and I think I haven't I've missed three years of SPEC from 1995 Until now, either as a camper or as a volunteer. But I got started volunteering at SPEC, refereeing basketball. So that's I would spend eight, nine hours a day officiating basketball, either on campus at Graceland or at the Lamoni High School gym. And they kept asking me if I wanted to do extra things. And I kept saying yes. And for the last nine years, I've gotten to be part of this amazing team of people. So

Jenn Killpack 11:27

I'm like, Doug, I was a camper at SPEC as well. And like I said, coming from Washington, DC, we had a really, really small congregation. And our youth group was small. So coming, coming to SPEC was like really eye opening, because there were so many other kids. That was not something I experienced, I was the only Community of Christ kid at my high school. So being with so many other kids in our faith movement was really exciting. And in some ways, I think, really transformational. Fast forward, some years post college, after my start at International Headquarters, I worked in the communications team, with Susan Naylor. She was a previous director of Spectacular, and she asked one year if I would come and take photos. I was like in the late 90s. And I was like, sure that sounds like fun. So I did that for a couple of years. And then at some point got asked if I would consider taking on some of the elective classes that we call adventures, planning those and organizing that. And then from there, the planning team, let me try out a concept that has become what we call SPEC Today, which is our theme class. And like Doug, I just kept saying yes. And I started directing, in 2011.

Jamie Varvaro 12:50

Yeah, and for me, my, when I lived in California, grew up in California, I SPEC was not part of my experience. I was heavily involved in the youth program there but just never made the trek to Lamoni. And so it wasn't until, you know, I attended, attended Graceland and then ended up living here in Columbia, Missouri, and got heavily involved in youth programming here and was youth camp director for a number of years and, and so then got involved with the delegation from this area and started going to SPEC as a as delegation staff, and then that grew into just building some relationships with those on the leadership team at that time, which as Jenn mentioned, Susan Naylor, and Steve Dimmitt, and Travis Harder, were co directing at that time, and I was asked to, to get involved in the leadership team then and take on some experience with being on the worship team. And so we, part of the beauty of Spectacular is we, we really that worship team, are more facilitators for the experience, and really encourage youth leadership and involvement in our worships. And so that's something that's been significant, I think, hallmark of, of what Spectacular is about. So then after that, after doing that for a number of years, then when I was approached, like Jenn, by Susan and Steve and Travis about looking to move on and become a director, and so I have, I am terrible when it comes to that kind of so I have no idea what year that was. But let's see, uh, Jenn, if you were what 2011? I don't know. It's not that important. So anyway, so got involved and became a director at that time with Diane Martin and Travis harder. And then then it was just shortly after that, that Jenn became a director and then and then

Doug, and so it's, there is something beautiful about how this comes together in this whole experience this whole leadership experience. I could not ask for two better friends and companions to go on this, you know, leadership journey with.

Robin Linkhart 15:07

Wow, that really does sound like a beautiful thing. And it's so exciting to see the three of you together here with these different stories working together as a team. I think we're ready to jump into the deep end now. So Community of Christ 2023 Spectacular, was held at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa, July 15, to 22. This year's theme was Wonder, and we want you to tell us all about it, Jenn.

Jenn Killpack 15:43

I'm gonna start off a little bit with our team. So are we kind of said like, Dare to Wonder. And we really kind of dive into the theme. Most, especially in our SPEC Today classes, and also through our worship what we call Morning Celebration. So in our morning time, kind of like between eight o'clock and noon, we start out with a celebration, which is about 30 minutes. It's, as Jamie said, camper led. We have some really great worship facilitators, Daniel Harmon and Emily Rose, and then a team of other facilitators that work with them, to really work with the kids that come to worship class and plan these amazing experiences every morning, and then two evening worships as well. So there's a mix of, you know, short spoken words, sometimes there's poems that are shared music, spiritual practices, it's just a great way to start our day. And then we move into our SPEC Today class. And with the theme Wonder, this year, our scriptural foundation was the story of the loaves and fishes. And so we really explore that theme both as a question and you know, as a window into all and divine mystery. We talked about things like curiosity and creativity and community, we really talked about the mysteries and miracles of life. SPEC Today, class was a place where we could uncover some unique things about ourselves and about the world. And it's a, you know, it's an opportunity for us to make new friends. We split everybody up during those times. So there's a facilitator pair that has a group of kids this year, it was about 60 campers, and each group, they meet in different locations, and kind of all have the same, the same class materials that are written by the wonderful Melissa Lewis. She's also on our committee. And then it really kind of is a place to dive deep into the daily themes, those that periods about an hour long. And then after that, we move into two sessions of adventure classes. And we call those adventures because there are a crazy cool variety of classes. So these are our electives. You can choose whatever you'd like. Some of them, you know, take one day to complete some of them you go every day. The variety is, like I said, I mean, it's pretty amazing. So there's things like acrylic painting, or jewelry making. You can play disc golf with some internationally ranked disc golfers. There are all kinds of sports clinics that were hosted by our Graceland coach staff. You could learn to play chess, you could learn jujitsu, you could go to a discussion class, that one was called this year Ever Wonder and it was just an open discussion. You could ask whatever questions you wanted to and the facilitator was willing to dive into those discussions. There were things like Residing in the Rhythm, which is a class about, you know, kind of diving into the lyrics of music that's meaningful to you. And then you get to share that with others in the class. There were things like Glass Fusion ceramics, you could be part of the play. There were just, I mean, there's so many options that if you can't find something to capture your interest, even a little, then we probably need to have a conversation. But that's how you get to spend your morning and then you get to eat lunch so that everyone loves that part too.

Doug Roberts 19:32

So once the morning session is over, the classes are over, basically from noon until 7:30 at night, there's open dining, continuous dining, so anyone who's on campus that has a meal plan, you can go eat whenever you want, as much as you want. The ice cream machine is usually a big favorite activity. But from noon until six 6:30 at night is when a lot of the to other sports and activities happen. And so from a team, team sports perspective, we've got volleyball, softball, basketball, and soccer. And the idea is that we hope every camper takes a chance to participate on a team sport, just to get, you know, mostly to have fun, but then also just to get the experience of being on a team and participating on the team. And then from an individual side, you can play ping pong, pickleball, there's quizbowl, there's wrestling, there's a cross country race one morning, there's a track meet, there's tennis. So there's a wide assortment of activities that kids can try and play. And we find that some campers who play these sports, the rest of their year really come to SPEC and love to try something new. And then some of them also like to, you know, play the sport that they spent their time at and kind of show their skills off, which it's a great blend, we have four different divisions, the Blue Division is that it's for the entry level, people that have never participated in the sport, that just want to give it a try. And the gold division is the equivalent of like a varsity level athlete in high school. So there's a range everywhere from blue, there's green, there's red and gold. And the idea is that we try to get you where you should be by and that's gonna make you we, we've learned that's going to help you have the richest experience playing the sport, you're not going to be playing at the blue level and be playing with somebody who's, you know, you're not gonna be playing blue soccer and be playing against somebody who's played soccer for 10 years. So the idea is that, you know, if you want to be competitive, that space exists for you, if you want to have more fun, and be less competitive, and that space also exists. And it's kind of the beauty of the way SPEC works, is really fun to watch kids who never really played sports, play volleyball for the first time, and just to see the joy that they experienced playing and passing the ball and being a part of a team. So, you know, the afternoon time is, is a lot of sports, there might be some rehearsals for the plays, or the musical acts or performances we have going on. The other kind of unique thing about SPEC is that, you know, your games might be at one o'clock, and at two o'clock, and then from three o'clock until anything in the evening of you might not have an activity. So it also gives campers and high school students this autonomy to sort of have some free time in a safe space and figure out what, you know, what interests them, where do they want to go? What do they want to do? Sometimes I get in trouble because I tell campers, if they're bored, maybe they're boring, which might not be the nicest thing to tell them. But it's kind of this window into there's, there's so many things you can do here. I'm just taking a risk, you know, and we we encourage that it's that one of our values, that SPEC is growth and risk, in the sense that we hope we create a safe space for people to try something new, or to push themselves in a way that maybe wouldn't have otherwise, like playing a team sport. Doing something that you've never done, a lot of people are afraid they're gonna look silly, if they don't, if they're not proficient or great at it, you know, in this world of social media, like everyone is an expert, when you look at them on tick tock. But that's not really true. And so it's fun to watch kids and campers engaged in this space of trying something new and playing a team sport. And, you know, again, we have we have all these sports, but some of our most participated in activities are Quiz Bowl and pickleball, and ping pong, these individual sports and activities for campers. So afternoon time has a lot of fun, a lot of sports, a lot of activities, a lot of cheer and other people on and a chance just to sort of hang out in the safe space and hopefully meet some people and make some new connections and form some new friendships.

Jamie Varvaro 24:12

Yeah, and then when we get into the evening time at SPEC, and I'll just kind of give a quick rundown of kind of what happened this year and in our evenings and then speak a little bit more to the wider experience. But, you know, really one thing we focus on more than anything is to be true to the name in this particular part. Well, actually in every aspect of Spectacular that that everything is above and beyond what these young people might normally experience at another event or another camp or that type of thing. So we truly try to bring in spectacular talent, spectacular speakers, and spectacular experiences and so Saturday, that first Saturday, obviously being the first day, there's a lot of orientation and things that happen to get the kids acclimated with the campus and that type of thing. But then we also have an icebreaker experience where it's probably if you think of any icebreaker maybe that you've had in your camp, this is that and more this is that on steroids it is, we bring in a facilitator from a company called Playfair, which is, this is what they do, they go around, probably more than anything to college campuses and do a lot of freshman orientation, things. And so, they are used to working with big groups, and they have these great activities that really start to begin that experience of establishing community of kind of getting out of their comfort zones a little bit and getting to know other kids that are beyond just their little bubble of you know, their delegation. And so it's a really a great thing to watch, because you get a lot of kids that you see that are kind of stilted and uncomfortable at the beginning. And then towards the end of that icebreaker experience. You know, they're just paddling around with, with kids that they just literally just met. And so then we go into kind of a roll call of delegations, which is always fun. And then we usually have some type of activity after that sometimes it's been a band that we've had a concert experience, we've learned that over the years that the kids really liked to once they come out of that icebreaker, that perhaps this is a good time for them just to spend some time in, in, you know, fellowship with each other. And so like this year, we just had this big pizza party and had some music happening there. On the quad outside the amphitheater here at the central part of campus. Sunday night, we brought in a a lot of times we'll find particular entertainers that really seem to connect with the kids and put on amazing shows. And so we've had like this comedian/juggler, Marcus Monroe, in years past, we've had Ben Seidman, who's a magician, they are, you know, on national tours, and on national TV and that type of thing. They also happen to be friends, and we're doing what they call the friends tour. And so we got, we actually brought both of them in to do a show together on Sunday night in the Shaw center. So that was a lot of fun. The kids love that. You know, this year on Monday, we did and actually I'm gonna back up there really quick with Marcus and Ben, they are one that we asked to stick around and do like a class experience the next morning, so they did a juggling class and a magic class. And so it's, it's pretty cool to have like, world class talent like that, be there and close to the kids where they can really, you know, have that type of experience. We did movie night on Monday night, Tuesday and Thursday, our worship experience our corporate worship experiences. There's also a track meet on Tuesday night. You know, Wednesday night, we get into our talent show experiences and and there's also later in the week, and on the evenings, there's the the play that the kids have been rehearsing all week long. And and then another great aspect of a class experience in the performing arts area is something called School of Rock. And so that's when a bunch of these a bunch of kids get together in a classroom experience with some professional musicians. And they essentially just pretty much jam all week, and then put together like three songs that they'll perform on Friday night. And so and we put them up on stage, and they truly they truly rock and it's pretty amazing. There's a dance on Friday night, and but over the years, we've

had big names, you know, come in and perform. And we've had these amazing speakers come in as well. And it's just again, we try very, very hard to make sure that everything we do is truly Spectacular.

Robin Linkhart 29:10

And that you're gonna give us information on numbers.

Doug Roberts 29:14

So in 2023. We had 410 plus or minus campers, and then total with the delegations we had about 520. So the delegations include the staff who are from all over the United States that attend with the campers and then if you count our SPEC staff, we were probably about 650 people total this year, which is a pretty sizable increase in 2022, which was our first year back after the COVID pandemic we had about 270 campers. So to go from 270 campers and 2022 to over 400 in 2023 is the a good jump. And that's largely due to, you know, the work that our youth ministers are doing. And the ministers in the field for the Community of Christ are doing. And to the campers who came in 2022 that went home and told their friends and invited their friends to SPEC. So we're curious to see what next year holds. But that was a that was a pretty, pretty big jump. And we're excited to have that many campers showing up this year.

Robin Linkhart 30:30

Thank you for that information, Doug. I was at a reunion Lamoni Heartland Mission Center reunion, which started the day that SPEC ended and we had several folks who had staffed SPEC and a few youth. And I'll tell you everybody was on fire about this year, they were so excited. So as we look at SPEC 2023, what would you say was different from last year, we've heard the numbers are different, recognizing last year was our first year to offer SPEC since 2019, due to COVID. And also recognizing that each year is its own unique experience as the years go by. So let's start with Jamie with how this year was different than last year and maybe prior years.

Jamie Varvaro 31:21

Yeah, I think you know, we'd like to think we have a solid foundation on which to build every year. And although it seems like that's always a work in progress for us, we there's I think Spectacular faces a lot of the same challenges that even our church does, it's kind of walking that fine line between tradition and transformation. And there are certain things that people expect in this Spectacular experience. And we try to continue to embrace those, but then also have the understanding that you can't stay the same if you want to grow. And so there's that transformative experience that happens with Spectacular. So I think, you know, I think most of those things that become different are because of the theme. And and how we explore our theme. And so that's the beauty of it, because really the theme is the is really the guiding our guiding light for that particular year. And so it's, it's pretty amazing. There were certainly, you know, challenges with, with having to be off for two years, because of COVID. And, and then, you know, trying to rebuild after that. And you know, that first year back, you know, having some protocols built in, and then this year, you know, moving to that next step where it's more normal, if you will. But, you know, for, for me, I think ultimately, the difference each year is theme driven.

Robin Linkhart 33:00

So Jenn or Doug, any reflections you have about how this year was different?

Jenn Killpack 33:07

Um, I think I would say just to kind of piggyback on what Jamie said, we have, we have staff who come both on the program side and also on the delegation side who have even longer histories with SPEC than us as somebody that they find rewarding, and, and just a way for them to express their ministry. And I think what we have to continue to keep in mind is that we have these campers for four years, potentially, like that's the that we only get them for four years, and then they cycle out. And we get a new crop of campers. And so you know what Jamie said about what the tradition versus transformation, I think is a really critical part of our planning. Because we do have, you know, this deep, rich history of this event, but also, you know, realizing that what campers need now is very different than what campers, maybe you made it 10 years ago, or for some people who've been determined standard 20 years ago or 30 years ago and things will always be changing. I think that's one of my favorite things about SPEC is that we're always reviewing, always evaluating always looking for ways to continue to be relevant and to provide you know what our campers need at this moment in time. I think the other thing for me is specifically this year that was different than last year. I don't know if everyone knows but we have a Council of Twelve advocate that is specifically assigned to Spectacular and we've been blessed with Barb Carter as our apostle for the last, I don't know I'm not good at numbers either, but for a number of years. She has has been our advocate in the council as well. And she's been super supportive of us as a team and of the event. And with her retirement, we were kind of unsure about who our new SPEC advocate would be. But we were pleased to know that it was Shandra Newcom. And this is a really unique situation for us, because Shandra has been involved in Spectacular way before and she was in the council 12. So she's been in charge of all of our performing arts and that whole kind of like segment of camp that falls under the umbrella of performing arts. So she's been in charge of that. And she's been on our planning committee for years. And I think I think this is the first time that our Council of Twelve advocate has been part respect prior to their assignment. So it's been it's really interesting and unique to have someone who has such a wealth of background and SPEC take on this new role and, you know, be really open and excited about, you know, how this role might change for them as we move forward. And as we move forward as a team. So that's, that'll be interesting to see how that unfolds, in the years to come.

Robin Linkhart 36:12

Doug, did you have anything you want to add?

Doug Roberts 36:17

It's not so much that it was different from last year. But that it was a continuation of, you know, prior to 2019, there was a culture aspect that was established that had been going on the culture reflected the values of what SPEC is about, and the values of SPEC align very closely with the Enduring Principles of the church. But that was a culture that had been thoughtfully created, and lived out for, quite frankly, for decades. And it changed when it needed to. And with having no in persons back in 2020 and 2021. Coming back in 2022, we realized we had to reestablish that culture, because a lot of it was a learned culture, the younger campers that would attend SPEC would follow the lead of the campers who had been there for one or two years. And when we came back in 2022, and I did a polling question during our welcome to SPEC moment and, and asked for a show of hands who had been at SPEC before as a camper. And only like 15 Hands showed up, raised up so of the 200 like, you know, what, 70 campers,

maybe 10% of them had ever been to SPEC. And so one of the challenge is in a continuation, the opportunity we have is to, to reestablish this culture at SPEC, and really simply the culture is, is like, telling a camper, you belong, you are enough, you matter, you are loved. And that isn't always something especially high school kids hear or experience or get to live into, in a lot of the communities they are in. And it's something we take really seriously at SPEC. And we realized we had some work to do, and continue to do and to reestablishing this culture and to creating this space where young people know that they can be whoever they are. That's one of the things we actually think we do the best at SPEC is create this space where campers can be themselves. And that's what we expect. We want that authenticity. We want that them to show up as they are. But that takes courage and bravery. And that's asking, you know, 14 to 18 year olds to be pretty vulnerable, and to trust a place that they might not have ever been. So that's, you know, that's one of the things that's been different. That's been really fun to get to look at how do we do this? Specifically, how do we do this? What are the things we do to keep this to build this culture to create it to reinforce it? And so, you know, we as the camp grew, of course, that was a challenge we faced this year, again, was how do we how do we remind high school students that this is what we're going to be about, and this is the way we're going to choose to live. This is the intention by which we want to live and, and engage in the world. And again, it's not something they all experience. And so there's a lot of fun there. I'm in a lot of messiness. And it's something we again, we enjoyed doing it. I know for me it it's what I think about especially having sixth and eighth graders having neighbors who are high school age students, I see the value, I mean really the value of creating a a space like this for young people, because it is the kind of space that can transform their life.

Robin Linkhart 40:06

Fascinating. You all lifted up some things that I think we wouldn't think of right off the bat of how things can be different from year to year, and especially between 22 and 23. You've touched on this a little bit already. But what were some of the challenges you encountered was SPEC this year? Or maybe, was there something that you wish you had known before SPEC began unfolding on campus? This particular summer? Jamie?

Jamie Varvaro 40:38

I'll see how Jenn and Doug's memory is I think for for me, the the thing that I immediately think of when you ask that question, Robin, is, we get to a certain point, just really a few weeks out from Spectacular where it pretty much goes to autopilot in the sense that Spectacular is going to happen, whether we're ready or not, you know, we've we've worked to that point. And we're resigned to that point. And so we just do our best to make sure that when we're finally to that point, we do have our ducks in a row. But as you all know, with any big event, there may be some type of infrastructure issues that we need to deal with once we get on campus and that type of thing. But it still comes down to the importance of community. And so, you know, we we heavily rely on Graceland staff to, to help us with certain infrastructure challenges, that perhaps we didn't see coming. And so I think that's my biggest testimony of all this about how we, we talk about Spectacular being a loving, accepting, growing, safe community. And but truly community is key because a lot of people all pitch in to make sure that if we do have challenges that were unexpected, we find a way to fix them.

Jenn Killpack 42:00

I concur with that. I think when I was thinking about my, my first thought was kind of what Doug already talked about, and trying to, you know, continuing to rebuild SPEC culture and community after this break from COVID. I think it's interesting to note that no campers, who were at Spectacular this year, had been to a Spectacular pre COVID. So not none of those kids who were there this year, had any like reference point other than, you know, post COVID years. Last year, you know, some of the long-term staff and even some of us were kind of lamenting about the small number of campers, even though we knew that it would be smaller because of the two years off. But somebody made a really, I think it was Diane, actually who shared her story, she was talking to some of the kids in her congregation who were coming to SPEC and this was in 2022. And they were so excited because it was kind of like the first year back to camps. And they asked her, like, how many people are coming in? And she's like, Well, I think like 250, you know, she was like, I'm sorry, is it that big, and they're like, oh my gosh, that's like the biggest camp we've ever been to. And she goes that was like a paradigm shift for her. That even though it feels small to us, because we're used to, you know, 700 kids or 800 kids. 250 was the biggest camp that that you know, these kids had ever been to. And she said, I have to stop thinking about it in a way that this is small. And then it's the it's a bad thing, but really be positive and excited for these kids who are coming because this is the largest gathering of Community of Christ youth that they've ever attended or ever been to. And I think that for me this year, it was still that same kind of mentality, even though we we grew in numbers, which was fantastic. Again, it's still the biggest camp that most of these kids have ever attended. So that's something and I think that we continue to just, again, that that transformation mindset instead of, you know, always falling back on tradition.

Doug Roberts 44:11

I mean, we've talked a little about the challenges. One thing I like to take into it, and try to remind myself is that, you know, we know we're going to disagree at times, we're going to see things differently, we're going to have different opinions based on just our life experiences. But that at the end of it. Our intention is to make the best experience possible for the campers. And so you know, one of our opportunities is to remember that when there is disagreement or dissent or frustration about how things are done or why things are done. I've personally as it's been a real growth opportunity for me, but it's to try and give people that benefit of the doubt that hey they're seeing this from their perspective. And this is how they think this experience can be the best for the campers. And so having that mindset really helps us, you know, goes back to what Jamie said, create this community where we know, as a staff, we know what we're there to do and why we're there to do it. And we know that with that intention alone, that that's also a healthy thing for our community to experience is to have, you know, to see people's passion come through for serving the youth, and say, well, we should be doing it this way, you know, when not doing it that way. And to know that something led them to that space to believe that to be true. And that doesn't mean it's not true. But it's certainly helps us continue to say what is the best way we can serve our young people, and create the best experience possible for them. And I can say that now really, like, this is what we want to do, but like in the heat of the week of SPEC, and with the heat of Lamoni. And then the frustration of all the little things add up sometimes, you know, it's probably not I'm probably not that calm, and probably my temper might flare up a little like I am human. But, you know, it's that mindset? And is that kind of key point that we go back to with community is that it's, it's not always, you know, well, it is messy, you know, and to build community can be, can be challenging. And so, you know, we had a lot of one-off sort of incidents this year that the three of us got to deal with. And a lot of people weren't aware of these things, which we actually think is the way it should be that

when there's these challenges midweek that that's what we need to be doing. And so we actually midweek, we had a little a little get together at noon, I think it was on Wednesday, where we just had a reset, said, You know this, we don't quite think we're living into the culture we want to. And so rather than let it just continue on, we've just called everyone together. You know, and Jenn eloquently, let them know that no one was in trouble. And no one was getting sent home, which was, you know, a big sigh of relief from everyone. But just that we had a different expectation of how we think we should be living into how Jesus calls us to live, and what does that look like. And also to give ourselves some grace for maybe not doing it the best way, because it's a new space for a lot of us or for a lot of people. And so, you know, we could get into the little details and the specifics. But those aren't really relevant. I mean, the challenge is continually, like how do we continue to build this community? And how are we called to build, you know, Christ like communities? And how do we teach young people about this?

Robin Linkhart 47:42

Thank you so much. What a lovely testimony that grace abounds, even when the heat index with humidity is 112. Okay, so I know this event is focused on youth and meeting their needs and celebrating who they authentically are, and building loving community. I want to take just a minute though, to check in with you. And have you share one high point for you personally this year at SPEC. Jenn.

Jenn Killpack 48:17

One do not follow directions, because I have two that come to mind. So I'll be brief. The first one was, I got to help read questions at Quiz Bowl. One day, when they needed some extra help. They were short staffed. Quiz Bowl is a game where two teams compete head-to-head to answer questions like from all knowledge areas like history, literature, science, math, etc. These kids that do this that are on these teams are so smart. So I'm reading the questions. They have buzzers and everything. And there's a very specific structure to these quiz bowl games. And I messed up as a reader and gave the answers when the other team was supposed to have had an opportunity to guess the answer before and I was like, oh, it's blah, blah, blah. And then they're like, Ah, you were supposed to guess and I was I felt terrible that I messed up this game but they were so gracious about my mistake. And I think that's just one expression of the kind of things that we've touched on before about living into this space of risking something new, knowing that you might mess up, but having a group that is grace-filled and will let you mess up and redo have a redo so that was one thing that was just a really high point for me. The other was kind of all through the week. At the beginning of SPEC, we always have like Welcome to SPEC moment with the whole camp. And in my part I said you know if anyone needs a mom hug this week, I'm up for it whenever like if you're just missing your mom or you need like just an extra little bit of love and you know attention come find me and I will be happy to give you Mom hug anytime. And I was really surprised and kind of humbled by how many campers took me up on that offer this week. Some of them came in for like a giant long like hug like they just needed someone to give them a little bit of extra love. Others would just be like, Hey, Jenn, across camp, you know, across the sidewalk and come run over and give me a hug. And it was just a really, that just meant a lot to me that that offer was taken up and that they felt comfortable enough to come up and ask for that.

Doug Roberts 50:33

One of the high points for me is, if you remember early on, I said I started my service at SPEC as official referee of basketball. So all I did was officiate basketball, and I, I still really enjoy officiating. And so as the schedule permits, I like to ref one or two basketball games a day. One because it's fun, I enjoy it mostly, too, it's, I think it's fun to like, it's a fun way to interact with the campers, it's a fun way to meet them in a different space where maybe I'm not the SPEC director, I'm now an official, a referee at the game. And while it's really fun for me, it also really reminds me of how appreciative I am of the staff, of the people who come to SPEC and give up a week of their vacation. And not only do they give up a week of vacation, a lot of them pay a fee to come to SPEC so that we don't pass that off on campers. So they but just reminds me of how appreciative I am of our community. And the passion that people have are serving our youth and the work and effort and time that a lot of people put into keeping score and refing basketball and the filling coolers with water and to being there in a space to serve our youth. So that's really a high point for me, is just to see the collective energy that SPEC brings to our community and how it draws people back in. And I was really excited this year, because at one point, I looked out, and I was kind of confused a few times if they were on staff or if they were campers. So I don't know if that means I'm getting old enough where I can't tell the difference between like low 20s and high school kids. But I was really also enthused to see how many young people young adults showed up at SPEC and how many of them were willing to bring their young children, but how they can make that commitment to showing up to be a part of our community to serve youth. So what an opportunity not just to ref but to remember all the work that people put into making SPEC a success. So

Jamie Varvaro 52:50

I think for me, I kind of have this common thread of a similar high point or high points every year. And that's really being open and sensitive to just kind of watching the kids that first day, and especially being mindful of the ones that just appear to be overwhelmed. Because like we said earlier in this conversation about this is really the biggest camp experience, most of these kids have, in fact, really without exception, and so and then it's kind of noticing those kids and then kind of keeping an eye out for those kids that I've kind of observed throughout the week. And seeing again, this transformative experience that seems to happen when they are embraced in a community experience. And so that is always a high point for me. I think that something that's always been I think the litmus test for us and for the committee and the staff, is that always looking out for the best interests of the kids, you know, because when it when push comes to shove, the answer is always gonna be what is how does this best serve our young people. And so you can't help but have high points when you have this commonness between the leadership and the staff and everything else, that the campers are the most important that we set aside, you know, our agendas, and just focus on them. And that's where that's where the high points come for me.

Robin Linkhart 54:21

Thanks for sharing all those high points with us. And we're gonna move right into looking at next year. So Jamie, what can you tell us about SPEC 2024 any details you can share with our listeners today?

Jamie Varvaro 54:37

Well, what I can tell you is that we do have dates. We announced them at the end of SPEC. We do that every year next year for 2024, our dates are July 13 to the 20th. And so as far as a theme goes that is still in formulation, but it will be something that it always seems to be is just the right next step in our

development, it seems that our themes just continue to enhance each other. And there's like this progression that is really exciting.

Robin Linkhart 55:14

And Jenn, we know that we are featuring this interview on What's Brewing series in Project Zion Podcast, which is all about mission. So as we think about SPEC 2024, what is it about SPEC that connects with the mission of Jesus Christ and how Community of Christ embodies and lives that mission?

Jenn Killpack 55:37

Think for me, the probably the most, the single most important way that it connects is a SPEC offers a vision of Jesus and Christianity that is a really different and counter to what people might see in media, the highlights are more like nationalistic, Christian experience. I think that countercultural way to see Jesus and Christianity and community is really critical. And it ties very closely to how Community of Christ is trying to live out and embody that in congregations and groups around the world. Another way, I think it's really critical is SPEC has a group of core values. And those core values really line up very closely with Community of Christ Mission and Enduring Principles, we really hold up the importance of the worth of people, and the idea of growth and risk. And through the way that we think about SPEC and the way that we think about worship, and classes, and sports, etc, all of that really looks at the giftedness of our youth, and the leadership of our youth, how do we, how do we help foster areas where our youth can thrive, both in exploring their giftedness, maybe in new ways, and also through leadership. And I think the other way is just SPEC is a great model for how to build Christ-like community. And Doug kind of, he kind of hinted at this, you know, our willingness to admit how hard it is sometimes, and the building community is messy, it can be difficult. And no matter what, it's always worth it, like aiming for that community for living out the way that you want to be in the world. It's always worth it, even though sometimes it takes work. Those things for me are really kind of like the key of why, you know why SPEC.

Robin Linkhart 57:45

So each one of you has been connected with SPEC for a number of years. As you think about that, if you were going to sum it up in one or two sentences, what are your hopes for SPEC as we continue to discern where God is leading us next? Jenn?

Jenn Killpack 58:06

For me, I want SPEC to continue to be a model of how community forms, how it grows, how it plays, and how it learns. Creating the holistic view of how we can live in in Christ-like and sacred ways.

Robin Linkhart 58:22

Doug?

Doug Roberts 58:24

At the end of a retreat, or a camp or a trip, sometimes you'll hear the comment or phrase like, Oh, we're gonna go back to the real world now. I think in my like mind, I would love for SPEC to be the real world. For you know, when people are coming to SPECs out and going back to the real world, like because to

me, it really embodies the way I think we're called to live and create community. And so no, it's not, I didn't think of that myself. Someone told me I forget who. But just that idea that like, the way we choose to engage in live intentionally with our life at SPEC, it can be that way everywhere. You know, another thing that comes to mind for me is, is a lot of people talk about the magic of SPEC, which, when I say it, I know what it means to me. But for me, there's also an important connection to make that I believe that's the presence of the Divine. And that, you know, it's that mystery. The magic of SPEC is that's where that's where the divine resides. And we just have to pay attention to it. And we can we can notice it.

Robin Linkhart 59:42

Jamie, how about you?

Jamie Varvaro 59:45

I'm sitting here listening to Jenn and Doug's responses, and I'm, you know, the hairs kind of raising up on the neck or I'm getting some of the goosebumps because of those feelings that we have that are in common, because I was thinking about this question Robin and, for me, it's about looking as we what our hope hopes are as where God's leading us. And it's really I think it's, it's our ability to find Jesus in the every day, the ability to see God even in the, in the secular, you know, that we, you know, Jenn had mentioned something about being relevant earlier in our discussion. And that's, that's part of and that that's part of what Doug's saying here too, is that how can we best be relevant to young people, and that's by creating an experience that there's this there's not this big break between Spectacular and the real world that somehow that God can be found in, in all our experiences, and that that SPEC can be a launching pad for that.

Robin Linkhart 1:00:51

Oh, I love that launching pad for finding God in the every day that is beautiful and profound. Okay, Jenn, where can our listeners find more information about SPEC? I know you've got photo albums from this year and other years. And also, where did they go to get information for next year.

Jenn Killpack 1:01:13

So when the information becomes available, we post that on our website, which is Spectacular.camp. And you can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook. We have a Flickr account, you can get there through the Spectacular dog camp website where you can see photos from this year and past years. And we try to we have a fairly low engagement rate like we don't do a whole lot of things through the year, probably most active on Instagram during the year. And then it ramps up as we get closer to each event. But you can definitely find great information there. And like I said when specific info on 2024 is available it will get posted in all those places.

Robin Linkhart 1:01:56

Alrighty listeners you heard it from Jenn, that's where you can find that information. Thank you so much for being with us today. Jenn and Jamie and Doug, it's been a fabulous and several times like Jamie has commented I too have had the hair on the back of my neck standing up. And, of course a very special thanks to all of our listeners. If you would like to hear more stories about mission, check out our What's Brewing series on Projectzionpodcast.org. If you want to hear more about SPEC, see Extra

Shot number 13 which features SPEC 2016, and Episode 121 featuring SPEC 2018 This is your host Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion Podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take care. Bye Bye.