



# To Gain Passionate Supporters, Try a Fantasy Camp

People want to experience your organization's inner workings. Immerse them!

*By Mark Mitchell & Emily Barrow*

**F**antasy camps are a powerful way for fans to connect with their favorite teams, coaches, athletes, and culture. Think about how you'd like to connect your core supporters to your organization, facilities, and people. Let's highlight the practices of some of your peers in the nonprofit sector who are doing so successfully.

## Make the Connection

### CONNECT THEM WITH YOUR PEOPLE.

A key component of fantasy camps is the opportunity to meet one-on-one with people on the "team." Keeping participant numbers low creates a "private club" feel where members are privy to the exclusive experience, knowledge, or networking opportunities provided by the camp. Some illustrations from the nonprofit world:

**Visitors to aquariums** marvel at the trainers who interact with sea creatures. A number of aquariums allow visitors to immerse themselves in the life of these professionals. For instance:

- The National Aquarium (Baltimore, Maryland, [aqua.org](http://aqua.org)) offers "Sleepover with the Sharks" where participants work with staff behind the scenes (and after hours) to prepare and feed the sharks. Imagine guests walking the "cat walk" just inches above the water in the shark tank!
- The Aquarium of the Pacific (Long Beach, California, [aquariumofpacific.org](http://aquariumofpacific.org)) invites guests into the "kitchen" to prepare food for the aquarium inhabitants.

In each case, participants experience the allure of working directly with the animals while feeling the excitement of the trainers themselves.

**Professional associations have a unique chance** to help people learn special skills alongside experts. Through the

Society of Architectural Historians ([sah.org](http://sah.org)), for example, fantasy campers spend time in Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois, where they design floor plans for their dream houses.

**Many people participated in the performing arts** as they were growing up. Now, later in life, many are interested in (and willing to pay for) a fantasy experience. Consider the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra Fantasy Camp ([bpo.org](http://bpo.org)), which gives amateur musicians the chance to rehearse and perform with professionals.

### How can you help your supporters connect with your PEOPLE?

Think about your staff. Do you have professionals who do specialized work that you could highlight in a fantasy camp experience?

### CONNECT THEM WITH YOUR FACILITIES.

Behind-the-scenes tours provide a great upselling opportunity for museums, theaters, zoos, and other venues. Have you looked around your facility to see if you could use the venue itself more fully for fundraising and unique guest experiences?

**Sleepovers hosted by museums** have been available for some time. At the "Snoozeum Experience" at the Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago, [msichicago.org](http://msichicago.org)), overnight campers

complete a scavenger hunt and sleep nose-to-nose with a 727, next to a giant heart, or steps away from a toy-making factory.

**The American Museum of Natural History** (New York, N.Y., [amnh.org](http://amnh.org)) has developed a Halloween-themed sleepover experience. Guests are encouraged to come as their best Museum-inspired characters or creatures.

**The Carnegie Science Center** (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, [carnegiesciencecenter.org](http://carnegiesciencecenter.org)) illuminates its facility in black light to change the visual experience for its guests during sleepovers. It also hosts a Christmas-themed Polar Express overnight experience for children.

**Ever wonder what it was like to man a Titan Missile** during the Cold War? The Titan Missile Museum (Sahuarita, Arkansas, [titanmissilemuseum.org](http://titanmissilemuseum.org)) provides campers the opportunity to sleep underground just a few feet from the largest missiles ever made. Baby boomers, coming of age in the Cold War, are particularly drawn to this immersion experience.

**Who hasn't dreamed of sleeping with the animals?** The Bronx Zoo (New York, N.Y., [bronxzoo.com](http://bronxzoo.com)) offers overnight safaris and the promise of slumbering with lions, tigers, bears, and other animals.

**Public tours of organizational facilities** are becoming more common as supporters relish the chance to see the inner workings of these venues. A number of places have museums that tie the venue's history with a tour of the operation. For example, visitors to Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky, can enjoy the Kentucky Derby Museum in addition to their tour of the racing facility.



or the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown (Patriot's Point Naval & Maritime Museum, Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, [patriotspoint.org](http://patriotspoint.org)). Every year, over 40,000 children participate in overnight camping programs aboard the Yorktown. Here's how that experience is described on the Web site:

"Pack your gear! For more than 25 years, the Youth Overnight Camping Program on board the USS Yorktown has been one of the nation's top education adventures. Youngsters arrive and experience the majesty of the USS Yorktown, sleep in the berthing areas where the sailors once slept, learn about naval and aviation history. Each camping package includes self-guided tours, meals and entertainment, plus an on-site educational program."

Youth from school groups, scout troops, church groups, and others pay \$72 (for one night) and \$92 (for two nights) for this immersion in military and naval history. Over 500,000 children have participated in the overnight programs.

**The National World War II Museum** (New Orleans, Louisiana, [nationalww2museum.org](http://nationalww2museum.org)) delivers science camps with a focus on the scientific discoveries of the World War II era and the broader contribution to society.

People are curious. These organizations have found a way to satisfy that curiosity and create greater bonds with their supporters.

#### How can you help people connect with your FACILITIES?

Think about your facilities. Are you using the space to its fullest potential as a fantasy camp venue or destination?

- Building and grounds
- Building contents
- Building ambiance
- Non-public areas for exclusive experiences
- Seasonal celebrations
- Themed events

#### CONNECT THEM WITH YOUR MYSTIQUE.

Bring your supporters up close to what's unique about your organization. Not only will they be eager to pay for the privilege, but getting to know your organization from the inside out will dramatically increase their passion for your cause.

**The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Parks** (Maryland, West Virginia, District of Columbia, [nps.gov/choh](http://nps.gov/choh)) offer a program called Canal Quarters. Participants live as canal workers did during the canal's construction during the Civil War.

**The Civil War Adventure Camp** (Petersburg, Virginia, [civilwaradventurecamp.org](http://civilwaradventurecamp.org)) allows campers to live as soldiers did during that period of American history.

**Guests can sleep overnight aboard the USS Silversides submarine** in Muskegon, Michigan ([silversidesmuseum.org](http://silversidesmuseum.org))

#### How can you help people connect with your MYSTIQUE?

Think about your unique elements. Are you fully utilizing them in a fantasy destination?

- Unique environment
- Rarely seen happenings
- Throw-backs to bygone eras



## Assimilate Future Trends

Here are some trends in sports fantasy camps that can easily be applied to the nonprofit sector:

**More single-day programs.** Single-day programs are ideal for nonprofit organizations. They provide a lower-cost alternative which may aid your organization's entry into this area. More immersive (and more expensive) programs can be added later if your fantasy camps prove successful.

**A growing number of immersive experiences.** Your loyal supporters want to get to know your organization on a truly deep level. As a result, they'll be receptive to opportunities to participate in experiences more than once or twice a year. Offer experiences as deep and frequent as possible while limiting intrusions into the routine of your people (and factoring in safety concerns).

**More camps for parents.** You may be able to connect a parent to a child's passion. Much as lacrosse camps teach parents about a game their children play, band fantasy camps (for example) may help a parent better understand their children's experiences as band members. In a similar trend, nonprofits are providing bonding experiences for fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and other family combinations. Imagine giving parents and their kids chances to connect while immersing themselves in your organization's work. Surely you'd create fans for life.

## Maximize Tie-in's with Existing Programs

Many sports fantasy camps offered by universities include a fundraising component. The beneficiary can be a specific cause chosen by the coach or administrator. For instance, Coach Dabo Swinney of Clemson University runs a Ladies Clinic each year with a portion of the entry fee (\$15 of the \$60) donated to breast cancer research.

So, we recommend that you explore all possibilities with area sports teams (professional, college, and high school) about your organization becoming the beneficiary of their efforts. We recommend this as a complementary (and more quickly organized) part of introducing fantasy camps into your program offerings.

Finding a mission connection may open some easy doors for you. A coach may have a parent or child who has experienced a challenge that will lead to an obvious tie-in with, say, the March of Dimes, the American Cancer Society, or other nonprofit organization.

“Parents are happy to pay for bonding experiences with their kids.”

“Keeping participant numbers low creates a “private club” feel.”

## Leverage Your Uniqueness

We're watching sports teams develop fantasy camps to better connect with their most loyal supporters. They're using their people, facilities, identification with the organization, and opportunities for their biggest fans to absorb themselves in a fantasy experience. You can do the very same thing with your organization.

You have people with talents not possessed by the broader public. Let's follow the lead of the Wizard of Oz and “pull the curtain back” to more fully let folks see what you do. Let's leverage the uniqueness of your facilities to allow people to see things they've never seen.

The fantasy camp experience will ensure people's connection to your mission and deepen their commitment of time, talents, and treasure to your organization. It will expand word-of-mouth communications as they share the uniqueness of their experience with others. Let's go for it. Let's make fantasy a reality! 

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## Making Fantasy a Reality

For more ways to raise funds and deepen relationships with supporters through unique experiences, see these articles at [www.NonprofitWorld.org/members](http://www.NonprofitWorld.org/members):

**Show Off a Little: New Approach Forges Bonds**  
(Vol. 26, No. 4)

**Five Simple Ideas for Developing Fundraising Results**  
(Vol. 29, No. 3)

**Deeper Donor Relationships = Increased Contributions** (Vol. 26, No. 4)

**33 Top Tips for Building Donor Bonds** (Vol. 26, No. 1)

**How to Turn Memory into Support** (Vol. 31, No. 4)

**Three Good Things: Creating Miracles in Fund Development** (Vol. 29, No. 1)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits ([NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute](http://NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute)).