

History Note: Collected corn tradition reaps benefits for campers

by [Jane McClure](#) // November 8th, 2013

Fall is harvest time, with farmers putting in long days to bring in their crops and prepare for spring planting. In Minnesota and Wisconsin, a harvest of a different kind has taken place for many years. Camp

Courage, which is now part of the True Friends camps organization, has reaped the benefits of one post-harvest activity.

Every fall members of Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapters have gone out into cornfields after the mechanical harvest and gathered the ears left behind. Students walk the fields and gather the corn by hand. FFA is a national career and technical student organization for middle and high school pupils. FFA promotes and supports agricultural education.

The corn FFA members gather is sold to local grain elevators and the proceeds sent to help children attend summer camp, as one of FFA's "Living to Serve" project. In 2009-2010, for example, the project involved 77 FFA chapters and more than 1,000 young people. That year more than \$197,000 was raised. It's estimated that the project has raised more than \$5 million over the years.

What began as sale of gathered corn has expanded into seeking monetary and in-kind donations for the camps. Some FFA chapters hold fundraisers along with their corn drives.

According to Courage Kenny Institute's website, the corn gathering project funds helped build the leadership activities/dining hall at Courage North, and the speech therapy center and greenhouse at Camp Courage.

Money raised has also helped thousands of children and adults attend camp thanks to "camperships" for those unable to pay the costs of an outing. For many rural Minnesota and Wisconsin schools the gathering of corn is a popular and eagerly anticipated tradition, with food and fun activities along with the harvest. The Albert Lea Tribune recently described how the tradition has continued for Freeborn High School, even though the school itself is no more.

Freeborn is a tiny town of about 300 people, not far from the Iowa-Minnesota border. Freeborn High School FFA members began gathering corn in 1953 for the camp program.

That year a storm had damaged area cornfields, making it difficult to pick corn by machine. FFA members decided to gather corn and help a worthy cause. That launched the tradition of helping Camp Courage. Other FFA chapters in southwest Minnesota embraced the idea.

Even though Freeborn High School closed 14 years ago and merged with Alden-Conger High School, its tradition of raising money for True Friends lives on. In October the camp supporters

presented True Friends with a check. The check presentation was made on the same day that Camp Courage and Friendship Ventures' merged camps adopted the new name of True Friends. The merger has created a larger camp organization to serve campers of all ages, and with all types of disabilities.

For 13 years, those with ties to the old Freeborn High School corn collection have raised money for the camps in other ways. A 12-person committee holds fundraisers including a golf outing every July, called Tee It Up for Camp Courage. The tournament raised \$18,500 this year and \$142,870 over the past 13 years, according to the Tribune.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com