Our Story

The Testimony of Family Fest Ministries

Written by Patty White, a founder and current board member, to tell of God's faithfulness in the early years of Family Fest, now, and into the future.

Ministry to Families, by Families

Family Fest began with a simple desire: to help families experience the joy of spending meaningful time together while growing in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Today it is a multi-denominational ministry of family camps, marriage retreats, and a Kids Counselor program.

In the mid-1980s, a group of young adults who were serving as staff and volunteers in youth ministry programs began meeting together in a multi-denominational Bible study. Within ten years, most of us had stepped away from volunteer youth ministry to raise our own families, but we continued to gather each Thursday night for Bible study — what became known as **Thursday Night Bible Study (TNBS).**

As our families grew and we welcomed children, many of us began attending a week-long Christian family camp each summer. While we appreciated the opportunity to worship and grow together, we found ourselves missing some of the joy, fun, welcoming atmosphere, and intentional outreach we had experienced through youth ministry. Most of us had met Jesus through a summer camp when we were middle school or high school students, and we knew firsthand how God could use a camp experience to change a life.

Steve White, a founding and current board member, had heard a Barna Research statistic suggesting that the average American father spent only three to ten minutes a day meaningfully engaged with his children. Steve's response was simple and heartfelt:

> *"They are missing out on how awesome their kids are."*

Around the same time, our TNBS group studied *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby. We were challenged to look around, recognize where God was already at work, and join Him in that work.

We began talking as a group about what we were seeing and sensing. Together, we started asking, **"What if we did our own weekend for our friends and their kids?"**

The vision was simple. We would invite a speaker for the adults. We would bring some of our best babysitters to love our children and teach them simple biblical truths. And, throughout the rest of the weekend, families would have opportunities to play together, build relationships, and experience Christian community.

The First Winter Weekend

Over Presidents' Weekend in **February 1997**, we held our first Winter Weekend at Grand View Lodge with **9 families from TNBS**. There was no staff, no ministry organization, no elaborate programming; simply friends getting together for a weekend with an intentional purpose.



The families who attended the first camp all pitched in. They bought their own food, recruited a few of their favorite babysitters to be KCs (kids counselors), organized worship, had one of their own play guitar and lead worship music, found a speaker and created simple activities for the kids. Many of those same founders serve on the Family Fest board today.

God showed up in our weakness and blessed our simple efforts.

We held another Winter Weekend the following February. We never imagined these weekends would become a ministry organization; we simply wanted to minister to our children, our friends, our friends' children, and ourselves. From the beginning, our mantra was: **Ministry to families, by families.**

God Opens the Door

In **2000**, Family Fest took another significant step forward. We held our first **Summer Splash at Quadna Resort near Grand Rapids, MN**.

As we grew, it became clear that we were filling a need, so we incorporated as Family Fest in **October 2000**. In **February 2002**, after attending a silent retreat, Pete came to the founding board members and shared that he felt God calling him to leave his current position and work for Family Fest full-time. We had been praying for help; how could we continue running a growing ministry while working full-time jobs and raising children? God appeared to be answering those prayers through Pete. In **March 2002** we received our 501(c)(3) status so we could begin fundraising, and Pete began serving as Family Fest's full-time Executive Director in **October 2002**.

In **January 2003** we added a second Winter Weekend, over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Later that year we created the Marriage Booster Retreat; a one-day getaway focused on deepening a married couple's love and commitment.

And, as they say, **the rest is history—history marked by God's faithfulness, leading, and provision.**

Family Fest Today

Family Fest still runs on the idea it began with: ministry to families, by families. Camps are led largely by volunteers, with a small staff team.

- **Winter Weekend:** a long weekend held twice each winter, over the Martin Luther King Jr. and Presidents' Day weekends, at Grand View Lodge in Nisswa, MN. Families share three nights of lodging and meals, with worship, speakers, and small groups for adults and age-specific programs for kids. Free time goes to sledding, snowshoeing, and activities for the whole family.
- **Summer Splash:** five days each August at Mount Carmel on Lake Carlos in Alexandria, MN, with the same worship, speakers, and kids' programs, plus swimming, tubing, and lake time.
- **Kids Counselors (KCs):** at both camps, high school, college, and young adult volunteers lead the kids' program groups: Infant-3rd grade, 4th–6th grade, and 7th–9th grade. More than 350 have served.
- **Marriage Booster Retreats:** encouraging, practical, and fun one-day retreats for couples at any stage of marriage, with laughter, teaching, and conversations on communication, conflict, intimacy, and faith. Held in the Twin Cities and at churches across the region.

In their words

“God wants us to experience his beauty and love. Fun retreats like Summer Splash and Winter Weekend are a way to truly experience God and his design for us. It’s like a little taste of heaven.”

- Chris and Catherine Solie

“The Winter Weekend is our favorite weekend of the year and is the perfect blend of adult time, kid time, and family time that helps each of us grow in meaningful ways. Nothing has been more impactful on our children’s faith than the Kids’ Counselors (KCs), who pour into them with such love, joy and authenticity.”

Justin and Genna Porter

“The Marriage Booster gave us time and space to reconnect and reenter our marriage on the firm foundation of Christ. … In such a short time, God totally reoriented the trajectory of our marriage, setting it on a new path toward deeper intimacy and appreciation for one another.”

- Zach and Erika Hall

Trusting God to Provide

Our original financial plan was intentionally simple and still holds true today. We would price our camps at **break-even**, making them as affordable as possible for families.

The Executive Director’s salary, office expenses, other overhead, and any future staff positions would be supported through fundraising, individual donations, speaking engagements Pete was invited to participate in, church donations, and grants.

This model reflected something we had believed from the beginning: **we wanted the cost of Family Fest experiences to be accessible, not a barrier to participation.** God has continued to provide through the generosity of people and churches who believe in the mission of Family Fest.

God’s Faithfulness Since 1997

What began with **9 families**, a handful of volunteers, and a simple desire to serve our families has grown into a ministry that has touched thousands of lives. Since 1997, Family Fest has ministered through:

- **52 Winter Weekends**
- **25 Summer Splash camps**
- **More than 85 Marriage Booster Retreats**, serving over **1,500 couples**
- Engaging **over 350 high school and college-aged students** who have served as KCs
- Welcoming **nearly 1,000 unique families** to Winter Weekend or Summer Splash

Behind every number is a family, a marriage, a child, a friendship, a conversation, a prayer, a worship service, a Bible lesson, a shared meal, a laugh, or a moment when someone encountered the love of Jesus Christ.



Looking Ahead

The vision that began in 1997 remains at the heart of Family Fest today. We want families and individuals to have the opportunity to step away from the busyness of everyday life, reconnect with one another, grow in faith, have fun as a family, and experience the encouragement of a Christ-centered community. Our goal remains to make Family Fest **affordable and accessible to any family or individual who desires a Christ-centered experience.**

We are grateful for every person who has prayed, volunteered, given, served, taught, encouraged, led, attended, or helped make Family Fest possible. Most of all, we are grateful to God. He took a small group of families who were simply willing to follow where He was leading and turned their willingness into a ministry that has continued for nearly three decades.

We never set out to build an organization. **We set out to serve families.**

We never knew what the future would hold. **God did.**

And through every season, He has been faithful.

See Family Fest in Action

A few ways to see and hear what Family Fest is like:

- **Summer Splash promo video:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIcnzXWej4k
- **Winter Weekend promo video:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyHuNFL3GyA
- **Marriage Booster promo video:** https://familyfestministries.org/marriage-booster-video/
- **Family Fest website** (explore past speaker messages, family and camper faith testimonies, camp registration, and other information)**:** https://familyfestministries.org/

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalms 100:5