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When the day came to go to camp, little Paul Ainslie wasn't nervous.

The 6-year-old just walked across the street, where the Boys and Girls Club of East Scarborough ran summer day camps out of the public school gymnasium.

All his friends were there. Crafts and sports, too. His mom watched him and his brother leave from the window, in early '70s Scarborough.

"Every kid on the street ended up at the Boys and Girls Club," said the 44-year-old Scarborough East councillor.

Long before he opposed wind turbines on the Scarborough Bluffs, Ainslie was happily making pen holders and ceramic tile ashtrays at summer camp, the perfect gift for his non-smoking father.

The camp experience was formative, but did not send Ainslie into the decorative ashtray industry. The skills he learned, especially as a teenage volunteer at camp, guided him to a career of public service, something he's not sure would have happened had he spent his summers in the plaza parking lot, as his parents had feared.

"My parents liked it because the kids were off the street, we weren't hanging around causing problems."

At camp, there was just no time to get into trouble. "It was very regimented, it was either morning or afternoon activities. As I got older, it was much more expansive with all age activities . . . lots of pickup basketball games, floor hockey, baseball, activity rooms with foosball. They'd take us on field trips to Argos football games."

As he grew, so did the camp. It moved from the gym, to a portable, to its current location on Galloway Rd. He was a camper until Grade 8.

"There was always something going on," Ainslie said. "I met one of my first girlfriends there."

Wanting other kids to enjoy the same summer fun he did, Ainslie started volunteering at the camp in Grade 10, and won an award for his service in Grade 12. "It helped me gain experience supervising others, organizing activities, and was a good foundation for later."

But of course, when he was younger, his aim was hanging out with his friends, not setting the course for City Hall. He is still close with many of the campers. As the Boys and Girls Club has expanded, the old crew has returned for ribbon cuttings and sod turnings.

"It had a positive impact on a lot of people's lives. It kept us off streets, it kept us physically active, and they took us all over the city. It was a great influence on us growing up."

When asked if he'd have been a city councillor without the experience, Ainslie takes a moment.

"You hear so many kids who don't have a community centre, they fall in with the wrong group of people, end up in a gang or something. My life and a lot of my friends' probably would have been a lot different," he said. "Idle hands throw rocks through windows."

Especially plaza windows.



Paul Ainslie, right, is shown with his brother, Mark, and father, Bill who had just picked them up from camp.

supplied photo