

My Experience at Northern Arizona University's Summer Leadership Camp

In the summer of 1980, I had the incredible opportunity to attend a two-week summer leadership camp at **Northern Arizona University (NAU)** as part of a special program for academically gifted students. The experience was unlike anything I had encountered before—a glimpse into college life, exposure to new and exciting fields of study, and a deep dive into personal growth. It was also where I fell in love, not once, but twice.

Arriving at Northern Arizona University

NAU, located in the picturesque city of **Flagstaff, Arizona**, was a world apart from the desert heat I was used to. Nestled in a cool forested area, the university provided an idyllic setting for the program. We stayed in the old dormitories and I had my own room, an experience that was both exciting and nerve-wracking for an adolescent boy.

The program brought together students from all over the state. Each school seemed to have sent five or six of their brightest, and we were placed into groups of about twelve. Our activities were led by high school seniors who served as our counselors. These counselors were participating in a different segment of the same study, gaining leadership experience while guiding us through our two-week journey.

A Taste of College Life

The camp was designed to introduce us to what life as a college student might be like. We attended classes, participated in leadership-building exercises, and ate our meals in the **Student Union**. This wasn't just a summer camp—it was a simulation of independence, responsibility, and intellectual engagement. It was an exhilarating feeling to be treated like a young adult, even if only for two weeks.

Beyond academics, there was something else that made this camp unforgettable: the people. It was a co-ed program, and many of the students and counselors were bright, confident, and—let's be honest—attractive. For a young man experiencing his first taste of freedom away from home, this dynamic made the experience all the more thrilling.

My First Romantic Interest

Among the counselors was one particular seventeen-year-old young woman who captured my attention like no one had before. She was warm, funny, and incredibly kind, and over the course of the second week, we found ourselves spending more and more time together. She took me under her wing, and we developed a close bond. To her, I might have been a little brother figure, but to me, she was *special*.

We walked together, talked endlessly, and shared countless moments. We held hands, hugged, and sat together during group activities. Our friendship deepened to something more—at least

from my perspective. And when the final night of the program arrived, she was my "date" for the farewell dance.

That last evening was magic. We danced together in the dim light, lost in the moment. When the program ended, she walked out of my life just as suddenly as she had entered. She left me with a note and a poem (which I had laminated), and the bittersweet memory of my first real romantic connection. I remember her fondly: Beth, my "Buddy-Pal-Friend."

Discovering My Passion for Technology

While my first experience with love was unforgettable, my second love affair at NAU would define my future.

As part of the program, we toured the university's **engineering department**. This was a time when technology was evolving at a rapid pace, and what I saw there completely changed the trajectory of my life. Two things in particular stood out to me:

A Hydrogen-Powered Car

Long before sustainability and green energy became mainstream topics, NAU's engineering department had developed a working **hydrogen-powered car**. Seeing this vehicle in action was mind-blowing. The idea that a car could run on hydrogen instead of gasoline was revolutionary, and it hinted at a future where technology and environmental consciousness could coexist.

Computer Graphics: The Birth of an Obsession

However, it was another technological marvel that truly set my soul on fire. During our tour, we were introduced to the university's **computer graphics department**. At the time, computer-generated imagery (CGI) was still in its infancy. This was 1980—two years before *Tron* would bring computer animation into mainstream cinema.

In a small, dimly lit lab, I witnessed something I had never seen before: a fully computer-generated animated short. It was a simple yet mesmerizing story featuring a **skeleton playing pool**. I still remember one moment vividly—the skeleton leaned over the table, aimed, and said, *"Eye-ball in the corner pocket..."* before sinking the shot.

It was unlike anything I had ever imagined. Even more astonishing was the process behind it. The university staff showed us the **code** used to generate the animation. Back then, every frame was meticulously crafted by hand—no modern rendering engines, no 3D modeling software, just raw programming skill and mathematical precision.

Something clicked inside me that day. The moment I saw that animation, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. Technology, computers, and digital graphics—this was my future. That brief encounter with early CGI sparked a passion that would guide my career and shape my interests for decades to come.

The Lasting Impact of NAU's Summer Program

The summer leadership camp at NAU was more than just an academic program—it was a transformative experience. It introduced me to independence, new friendships, and intellectual challenges that pushed me beyond the limits of traditional schooling. More importantly, it planted the seeds of my lifelong fascination with technology.

Looking back, I realize that those two weeks at Northern Arizona University were pivotal. They gave me my first taste of what life beyond high school could be like, introduced me to fields that would later define my career, and, of course, provided me with my first bittersweet lesson in love.

Some experiences fade over time, but others remain vivid, shaping who we become. NAU's summer program was one of those defining moments for me—an experience that still echoes in my memory as clearly as it did more than four decades ago.