

Colorado County Insider

FALL 2025

LIVE ACTION **ROLEPLAY**

LEARNING REAL-LIFE SKILLS
BY TRANSFORMING PARK
INTO FANTASY

ALSO INSIDE:

FNB of Eagle Lake, 4

Columbus in the Movies, 8

Texas ChalleNGe Graduation, 14

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ON THE COVER

Daniel Ibbotson searches for hidden treasure chests in the dense forest of Eagle Lake Veterans Memorial Park during the Mystic Moon LARP, Sunday, Aug. 10.



Colorado County Insider | FALL 2025

Table of Contents



'Dreaming Forward'

ALSO INSIDE

4 | HISTORY: FNB OF EAGLE LAKE

Local bank gets a fresh look but keeps it all connected to Colorado County.

8 | 'FINDING SOLACE' FEATURING SMALL TOWNS

Columbus is one of the many host small towns in an award-winning independent film about social justice issues.

12 | LIVE-ACTION LEARNING

LARP adventure teaches real-life skills through creative imagination.



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OUT & ABOUT



Where Learning Becomes Legendary

Factions of kids embarked on quests and battled for flags in the forest of Eagle Lake Veterans Park as part of the semiannual Mystic Moon Live-Action Roleplay (LARP) over the hot, humid weekend of Aug. 9-10.

Mystic Moon LARP invited around 10 kids to create and act as characters and explore the imagined world of Lacis Lunari. LARP follows the general concepts of tabletop roleplaying games, like Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), but has players portray their fantastical characters through physical action with costumes and props. David Burkhalter, the main organizer, hosted the first official LARP in the summer of 2024. Mystic Moon LARP seeks to create a magical world that encourages imagination, teaches real-world skills and builds on the creativity of kids ages 11-17.

INSIDE THE LARP

The LARP runs twice a year in August and January during the last weekends of Rice Consolidated Independent School District's summer and winter breaks. On Saturday, the kids start by shaping

and building their characters. After receiving starting equipment, they venture out into the forest to complete quests, find small hidden treasure chests, talk with non-player characters (NPCs; volunteers acting as guides and characters) and slowly better their equipment.

"You can start from nothing as a brand-new adventurer at the LARP," Burkhalter said, "Within a day, you have enough coins to upgrade your armor, weapons... You can fully upgrade yourself with new equipment, waterskins, maps [and] compasses."

The kids will explore various areas set-up in the forest including the Village (starting base), the Crossroads, the Glade and the Forest of the Fairies. Some will camp overnight in the park while others go home for the night. This year, stormy weather forced the kids to sleep inside Burkhalter's local business. On Sunday, the kids wrap up quests and play team games like Capture the Flag or compete in archery or sword-fighting tournaments. This year, they trampled through the underbrush of the forest and battled massive mosquitoes

during a fast-paced, energetic game of Capture the Flag.

The LARP structures interactions through combat and roleplay. Combat with the foam weapons follows a one-hit kill rule, so if any player is hit with a foam sword, their character is temporarily dead.

"To incorporate a measure of safety, in order to respawn, our players have to drink the 'waters of life' from one of our hydration stations," Burkhalter said. "... They have to drink water to keep playing. It's very easy when you're young to forget to hydrate, especially when you're focused on battling and finding cool quest items."

Volunteers at each area have a walkie-talkie to coordinate with others to ensure kids' safety. Volunteers will regularly monitor if kids are staying hydrated and if they are getting overheated. The Village has a cooling tent with a portable air-conditioning unit to help with high summer temperatures. Burkhalter said that the safety of the kids is the number one priority for the LARP, "above immersion, above gameplay, above fun."

EXPLORING LACIS LUNARI

Mystic Moon LARP takes place in the fictional setting of Lacis Lunari, Latin for "lunar lake." Burkhalter described the lore, or fictional information and history, of the world as "always evolving." The lore of the world is not physically recorded anywhere, but Burkhalter said he intends to create a leatherbound tome to track the evolution of the LARP. Currently, the young world is still being shaped by time and the kids.

"Long ago, in this fantasy realm, a piece of the moon broke off and fell from the sky, which not only impacted our world and changed things forever with countless disasters [but] also shattered magic," Burkhalter said. "Magic is now few and far between in our world... Magic is often reduced to runes or items or potions."

In the setting, the cataclysmic event is named "The Fall" and destroyed all



Quinn Nevarez and Ellie Thompson spar with foam swords during the Mystic Moon LARP, Sunday, Aug. 10, at Eagle Lake Veterans Memorial Park.

knowledge and lore. Burkhalter said this leaves the world very open-ended throughout its development and allows the organizers to add new events and incorporate ideas from the kids.

"We want the kids to feel like they aren't just entering the world but that they're part of it," Burkhalter said. "They're an integral part of it, and it wouldn't exist without them."

Mystic Moon LARP also introduced factions for the first time this year to add a layer of complexity and competition. The two new factions are the Laissez Fairies and the Custodi Silvarum. The Laissez Fairies focuses on treating nature, animals and plants properly with kindness. The Custodi

Silvarum (Latin for "Keepers of the Forest") focuses on resisting industrialization in support of the power of nature.

Burkhalter mentioned that future Mystic Moon LARPs will likely develop royal or noble houses created by the kids and organizers. Over time, the kids will shape the values of houses and name heirs to form lineages.

LEARNING THROUGH LIVING

"Everything can be educational, and...when it comes to kids, everything should be educational," Burkhalter said. "That doesn't mean that it shouldn't be fun. [The goal] is finding a way to marry those two things together, so that just by learning something, the kids are having fun learning it."



Daniel Ibbotson and Alex Mach, who's carrying a red flag, march towards a trail deep in the Eagle Lake Veterans Memorial Park to play Capture the Flag during the Mystic Moon LARP, Sunday, Aug. 10.

Burkhalter described how the LARP teaches kids skills, especially "ones that are slowly getting lost," through building foam weapons, sewing clothes and equipment and engaging in faction activities. For example, the Custodi Silvarum faction teaches bushcraft skills including starting fires, creating rope and finding shelter. The Laissez Fairies faction teaches foraging in different seasons.

The noble houses that will soon be added to the LARP will encourage and teach personal characteristics like leadership, responsibility, accountability and more. For example, if a player creates a house based on the knighthood and chivalry, the house and the players that join it will strive to uphold rule-following and loyalty.

"Different factions have different purposes. Different houses have different rules. It should be something that's meaningful to the players in their roleplay," Burkhalter said. "... They should hold themselves to [those values], and a lot of those pass off into real world ideals as well."

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Burkhalter is the co-owner of Moonside Macaron, a French bakery and coffeehouse near the city square of Eagle Lake. Moonside Macaron frequently hosts game nights and other fun events for kids, including a D&D campaign. Burkhalter said the LARP stemmed from his love of Dungeons and Dragons.

"Playing D&D and having that fantasy aspect of things and having to be open and free and nerdy about stuff is just incredibly fun," Burkhalter said. "Transferring over to LARP felt like the natural progression of things. It's a lovely opportunity for the kids, which is really what it started for."

Ellie Thompson, a 15-year-old participant, has been attending Moonside Macaron's game nights for a long time. She learned D&D from her father and plays with her brother.

"I've been going to the game club for a little bit, and I really enjoy playing D&D," Thompson said. "If I get to do it in real life, then it sounded really fun."

Burkhalter gathered a few volunteers and ran a short, trial-run of the LARP before its official start. Around that time, he utilized his business to collect donations and organize funds. However, he later organized Creative Spaces Outreach, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating free community engagement spaces. The nonprofit primarily focuses on the LARP and on its Eagle Lake Community Garden. Burkhalter said the nonprofit has made fundraising easier by ensuring donations are spent as intended.

"[The nonprofit] adds security to a lot of our donors, but also it lets us identify more with what we are actually doing, which is to create spaces that are free, that are creative, that are all about the kids," Burkhalter said.

Shaina Parham, a non-titled board member, met Burkhalter at a farmer's market and became involved due to her shared interest in D&D and renaissance festivals.

"[The LARP] is something I would have wanted when I was in high school here going to Rice," Parham said. "When I was in school, there wasn't anything like this... This is something I would have wanted so bad."

This summer is the second summer LARP for Mystic Moon. Burkhalter said the LARP tries to incorporate new items and welcomes more volunteers every year. Last year, the LARP lacked tents and decorations for the areas, but feedback from the kids still was highly positive. Alex Mach, 14, learned about the LARP at the farmer's market and joined with his sister. He said nothing else has come close to being like the event.

"I did it last year, and it was a blast. We just did everything you could think of," Mach said. "...This is awesome. It's honestly one of the best activities I've ever done."



'Dream the impossible'

109 cadets take next step in life's growth

BY JIMMY GALVAN

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Nestled in Eagle Lake is a successful program that is changing the lives of youths that many might have written off in the past.

The Texas ChalleNge Program graduation ceremonies were held in Eagle Lake last June that celebrated 109 graduates with 109 different success stories.

Through the partnership with Rice Consolidated ISD, 36 received their high school diplomas and 15 earned their GED's.

"We have 31 who would like to join the military and 18 who intend to go straight to college.

While a number will return to high school, all have received job skills training and are prepared to enter the workforce," said David P. De Mers, Director of the Texas ChalleNge Academy.

De Mers said the Texas ChalleNge

Academy (TCA) is a 5 1/2 month long, voluntary, quasi-military, residential program for youth who have dropped out of high school or are at risk of dropping out of high school. The residential program is followed by a 12 month follow up period where staff and mentors continue to support and

encourage cadets as they transition back to their communities. The program is funded through the Department of Defense and the Texas Military Department.

The National Guard Youth ChalleNge Program currently operates 40 programs in 28 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. There are 2 campuses in the state of Texas, located in Sheffield and Eagle Lake.

The program's mission is to help reclaim the potential of at-risk youth and decrease Texas high school dropouts. TCA helps youth become successful, responsible, and productive citizens through a program of mentoring, education, physical fitness, and volunteer service to the community.

Applicants are 16-18-year-old teens who have either dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school. Cadets live on campus for 5 1/2 months during the residential phase of the program.

They may recover credits, earn their GED, or, if qualified, earn their high school diploma. Academies are tuition-free, accredited high schools and based on Equal Opportunity principles.

After graduation, Cadets return home and meet with a mentor every week for 12 months, which helps keep their resolve and change their lives for the better.

De Mers said TCA recruiters connect with youth and families from all parts of Texas.

"Many search for an alternative education program online, while others hear about our program from former graduates and others who have experienced success here," De Mers said.

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