A Summer Camp for Kids Whose Parents Have Cancer

Camp Kesem helps kids whose parents have been diagnosed with cancer rediscover the joys of childhood.

June 17, 2019 By Caroline Tien

Where do children whose lives have been affected by a parent's cancer go in the summertime? If they're lucky, it's to one of Camp Kesem's 116 chapters.

On the surface, these summer camps look no different from any other: Their grounds boast lakes and hiking trails, and their itineraries are dedicated to outdoor activities like swimming, canoeing and cooking up s'mores. But these camps cater to a unique demographic—the children of parents who have cancer, have survived cancer or, in some cases, have died of cancer, of which, according to Camp Kesem's website, there are more than 5 million in the United States alone. Founded in 2000 by a college student, Camp Kesem's star has risen exponentially over the course of its nearly-20-year history. In 2001, 37 children attended its camps; in 2018, nearly 9,000 did.

Two young campers and a counselor canoe.Courtesy of Camp Kesem

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of Camp Kesem—especially for families financially strained by the cost of cancer treatment—is that it's totally free, thanks to individual and corporate donors.

For CancerHealth.com blogger Adam Hayden, a father of three who has glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer, the decision to send his eldest son, Isaac, 8, to Camp Kesem last summer was "one of the best, most uplifting our family has made [since] my diagnosis." Indeed, Isaac was so taken with the experience that he now primarily goes by his camp nickname, "Cheese Pizza." "Campers can attend until they are 18, and then they have the option to become counselors," explains Hayden, who recently shared his family's story at Camp Kesem's annual fundraising gala. "Cheese Pizza has already told us this is what he will do."

For a role model, Cheese Pizza need look no further than soon-to-be four-time counselor Molly Murphy. A student at Syracuse University in upstate New York, she knows firsthand what her charges are going through any given summer: Murphy's mother died of cervical cancer in 2004, when Murphy was 6. "It's such a loving network of support and amazing things that I wish I'd had when I was a kid and had a parent who had cancer," says Murphy. "After going to camp for three years, I can see that these kids get this new sense of confidence and a new sense of love and hope, even if their parents have passed away, even if their parents aren't doing too well."

Murphy credits two activities unique to Camp Kesem with instilling these qualities: nightly cabin chats, during which campers share what is on their minds, and a onetime empowerment

ceremony, at which everyone at the camp, counselors included, comes together to collectively answer the question “Why am I at Kesem?” “The kids talk about their parent’s cancer, and they get to open up, they get to say as little or as much as they want,” explains Murphy. “It’s really just the most transformative experience of my life. When I first went to the empowerment ceremony, I was shocked at how resilient these kids are, and how vulnerable they were being, and how strong they were. It changed everything for me.”

Campers begin a fun day of activities at Camp Kesem.Courtesy of Camp Kesem

But for all that, there’s not a disproportionate focus on cancer at Camp Kesem—quite the opposite, actually. With the goal of providing a “safe and welcoming environment where kids can have fun and rediscover their childhood,” as its website states, the camp is primarily focused on directing campers’ attention away from the presence of cancer in their lives. “For some of our families, they feel like camp is the best week of the year for their kids,” explained Domonique Hollins (or “Domino,” as she’s known at camp), Camp Kesem’s vice president of brand and marketing. A former Teach for America employee with a passion for “creating spaces that help children be the best versions of themselves,” Hollins says the camp’s mission is to “help [kids] let go of all the baggage that they’re carrying at home and…not feel uncomfortable or sad.”

For that, Hayden is thankful. “The freedom to escape cancer for a week, with only a touchpoint here or there,” he says, “allows the dialogue to emerge naturally between camper peers and counselors.”

Just such a dialogue emerged between Murphy and her younger brother, Emerson. In the spring of 2017, she asked Emerson, then 16 years old, to attend the camp as an early birthday present to her. He agreed—grudgingly.

“The first couple days, he had his arms crossed, hoodie up, wouldn’t talk to anyone, was just kind of mad I’d forced him to be there,” she said. “But by the end of the week, he was just having the best time ever. I just got to step back and watch him grow, not only as a leader and a role model but as a human, and he grew because of camp, because camp gave him a safe space and a place for him to be the person he was always meant to be, without judgment, without any fear of the real world and all the scary stuff that comes with it.”

Emerson attended again last summer. At the final bonfire, he and Murphy shared a heartfelt sibling-bonding moment that Murphy calls “by far my favorite camp memory.”

“He came up to me and was like, ‘I wasn’t going to tell you, but thank you so much for bringing me here,’” Murphy says. “It was just the most amazing thing I could have ever heard from him.”

Campers embrace each other in a moving moment.Courtesy of Camp Kesem

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It’s not too late to sign your child up for Camp Kesem this summer! Apply at www.kesem.org today.

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