

Summer camp: Where kids get to be kids

Carole A. Dicton
Correspondent

BLAIRSTOWN — In most ways, Camp Quality is just like any other summer camp for kids: There are boys' cabins and girls' cabins, separated by a small lake (over which five-year-old camper, Tucker, rode a zip line earlier in the week). In the mess hall, campers report that the food is "ok." At any given moment you will hear outbursts of laughter or shrieks of delight as campers bomb each other — and staff members — with water balloons.

Among the mob of about 40 kids enjoying the revelry, however, there are 30 patients from the Saint Peter's Children's Hospital pediatric oncology program. Camp Quality is a one-week sleepover camp for children in either remission or treatment for cancer. This year's program took place June 25-30 at the Happiness is Camping campground.

"When children are diagnosed with cancer, they often have to grow up very fast," said Glenn Bouthillette who founded Camp Quality NJ in 2003. "Our objective here is to give kids the chance to be kids again — even if it's just for a week."

When Bouthillette began the camp three years ago, he contacted Dr. Larry Ettinger, chief of pediatric hematology and oncology at Saint Peter's University Hospital, New Brunswick. Ettinger and his wife Alice, a nurse practitioner, had been involved with other camps specifically designed for children with cancer, but Dr. Ettinger says the difference with Camp Quality is the "companion" program, which matches each camper with an individual volunteer who is with them the entire week; a sort of personal buddy.

"The one-to-one ratio is unique," Ettinger said. "It's a real advantage over the usual camp format where you may have one counselor responsible for a whole cabin of kids. It makes it possible to develop close and lasting relationships."

Companions submit detailed applications that help organizers match them with campers. Everything from music and movies preferences to more subtle, but important personality traits are considered. For example, female companions are asked to rate themselves on a numbered scale that ranges from girly-girl to tomboy. Bouthillette said this helps them make strong matches.

The process seems to work well. Camper Julia, 15, and her companion Sarah met for the first time at a local restaurant just shortly before they came to camp (they live only a few miles from each other). When they arrived at camp, they discovered that each packed an identical t-shirt. Even more ironic, neither actually owns the shirt — each swiped it from her respective sister.

When asked what she liked best about Camp Quality, Julia enthusiastically responded, "Everything!" When pressed for specifics she said, "I caught my first fish!" Sarah talked about the "snake guy" who apparently brought "nasty-but-cool" reptiles to show the campers.

Another camper, Sam, 12, said her favorite part of the week was the pie fight. Bouthillette explains, "It's whipped cream on paper plates and we do it out here on the lawn and then a local fire truck comes to hose us all down."

Alice Ettinger says the philosophy of Camp Quality is well aligned with the mission and vision of Saint Peter's Children's Hospital, with its focus on the whole child. "It's about taking care of the spirit and soul as well as the body." Following camp, Ettinger spoke with one mother who said her daughter was "a new kid" after her week at camp.

The Camp Quality program continues throughout the year with reunions and other events. Campers pay nothing and all activities are funded entirely through donations and run entirely by volunteers (It took a staff of about 55 volunteers to run this year's camp). Bouthillette is always recruiting both volunteers and donors. To learn more about Camp Quality, visit www.campqualityusa.org/nj/.

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"Dorm Mom" Shelley, center, called volunteering at Camp Quality a life-changing experience. Along with camper Julia, left, and companion Sarah, the three plan to meet again at the beach later in the summer.

— Carole A. Diction photo

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