



Four siblings see each other once a year at camp. ©Dennis Brown

By: Jan Udlock

Since third grade, Beth B. had bounced back and forth between her biological mom's house and various foster homes. She rarely saw her five brothers and sisters because they lived in different foster homes.

When she was ten, her caseworker told Beth about a camp for foster children where she would be reunited with her siblings. "I didn't want to go because I hadn't seen them for over a year. It sounded corny!" However, by the end of the week, Beth "realized [that] this was the BEST thing EVER. I got to know my siblings! I loved it!"

Camp To Belong (CTB) is a weeklong camp designed for foster children who don't see their siblings on a regular basis. Northwest CTB Director Karyn Schimmels explains that the camp and all its activities are designed to encourage bonding and provide opportunities for brothers and sisters to share positive childhood memories with each other.

In the average family, childhood traditions with family members are easily taken for granted. However foster kids have had disrupted lives, and they don't have the luxury of simple childhood experiences with family members. "Children who lack time shared with biological parents and siblings can have a significant hole in their lives. Camp's trained staff helps children grow through deepening their sibling bonds, assists them with conflict management with sibling relationships, and guides them with their emotional regulation," says clinical psychologist and parent educator Doreen Dodgen-Magee, Psy.D.

## A Mosaic

Camp To Belong has an entirely volunteer staff, and the camp depends on contributions and donations. Retired businessmen, sales people, caseworkers, moms, teachers, and nurses make up the mosaic of counselors. Because most of the people in foster children's lives — including foster parents, caseworkers, and attorneys — are paid to take care of them, many of the children do not understand why anyone would want to volunteer to be a counselor at camp.

Luke Adams, a high-school English teacher from Portland, said, "I went as a volunteer counselor expecting fun, and I fell into a world with some very tough kids that if you have half a heart and the tiniest bit of patience, you will break through the concrete exterior of these kids. By the end of camp I know I have been a part of building something that is lasting inside of someone else." This summer will be Adams' third time as a camp counselor.

## At Camp

CTB's goal is to provide a safe and quality experience for these children. Due to this specific population, the ratio of staff is one counselor to every two children. Campers ages 8 to 18 are set up in family groups with their siblings, and the campers spend their days engaged in a variety of camp activities with their siblings.

## Treasured gifts

Schimmels explains that nighttime can be a time when kids are most reflective: It's a time when they can be worry, be lonely, and have memories of the past. Consequently, the first day of camp a sibling makes a pillow for another sibling and writes a message on it, decorates it, stuffs it, and sews it up. The pillows are then presented to each child. This pillow can be extremely comforting to the child after she leaves.

Beth still has her pillow from one of her sisters on her bed from the first year she attended. Her pillow says, "Beth, all the

things that have happend in our life was sad, but you are mor than a sister your my best friend. I would love to be with you more than I am. its hard to let you go like this because your my sister and i love you with all my heart. J”

## New Memories

Birthday parties are a natural childhood event, with family and friends. However, many foster kids do not have their siblings near to share the event. The staff throws an elaborate birthday party and presents a cake especially created for each family group. The siblings give each other a gift that they have picked out from the camp store and also exchange personal handwritten birthday cards.

Zander N., who lives with his grandparents, was asked to go to CTB last year. Like Beth B., He didn't want to go, but his two younger brothers, who were in separate foster care, wanted him to go. At camp, Zander had opportunities to encourage his brothers through some scary activities like water tubing. "You can cheer them on when they don't want to do it. I want to open doors for them and tell them they can surpass me," says Zander.

This year at CTB, Zander plans to be a high-school ambassador, which allows him to be a role model for the younger kids. Ambassadors are screened and trained to befriend the campers but not get involved in, as Zander puts it, "the drama." "I'm not there to tell them what to do but help navigate the younger kids towards what is the right thing to do," says Zander.

## Simple Facts

Three-time counselor and caseworker Katie Sangster explains how simple facts the kids learn about their siblings affirms the camper's own thoughts and life. "During open-mike time, I remember a young boy asked his teenage sister to stand up with him. And he just stood there and beamed, "Here's my sister. I just want everyone to know. She's my sister," recalls Sangster.

One day during the week, the campers are separated by age instead of family groups. The youth, ages 14 and older, attend a life skills seminar in which they spend the day talking about the transition from foster care to adulthood. Skill inventories are taken, and life goals are discussed. Information on community colleges, tech schools, universities, and educational scholarships are reviewed. These older children take home a notebook crammed full of information to help them pursue future goals.

While the older kids are attending that seminar, the younger set attends a forum where community service is introduced. One year campers wrote letters to military personnel in the armed forces. Campers write thank-you notes to the camp sponsors. Kids are reminded that their life can make a difference today, and they're encouraged to check out further volunteer opportunities, such as working at a pet shelter or at a food pantry when they get home.

By the end of camp, the crossed arms are dropped and rough attitudes soften. The day is filled with tears and lots of hugs for everyone. Siblings walk around arm in arm as if together they can hold back time.

Beth will be a counselor this year at Camp To Belong in Silver Creek Falls, Oregon. "My goal for the kids that come this year is to get the meaning of camp. And it might be hard to go back, but you just got to let your foster parent and caseworker know how much you want to see your siblings!" It's what family is all about.

If you are interested in making a donation or want further information, please contact Karyn Schimmels at [kschimmels@verizon.net](mailto:kschimmels@verizon.net) or see Camp To Belong, Northwest at [www.ctbnorthwest.org](http://www.ctbnorthwest.org).

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