

The Oregonian

Camp reunions transform siblings separated by foster care

Sunday, July 08, 2007

By Margie Boule

Near the end of the movie "Ocean's Thirteen," George Clooney turns to Andy Garcia and says he can't return the \$72 million he owes him; he's given it to a charity called Camp To Belong.

If only it were true.

The movie may be fiction, but there really is a Camp To Belong. In fact, there are seven of the camps, scattered across the United States and in Canada. Every summer those camps fill with foster children who are reunited at camp with brothers and sisters who live in other homes, in other places.



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Camp To Belong Northwest just finished its second annual weeklong family reunion, on the shores of Lake Coeur d'Alene in Idaho.

Ninety-six children, from 39 families, were reunited for a week at camp. They played games, hugged, ate and exchanged gifts with their brothers and sisters.

"If I could only have one wish for a gift, on my birthday or at Christmas," one boy said the night before camp ended, "that gift would be Camp To Belong." His brothers stood by his side.

Kids forced apart

They have Karyn Schimmels to thank.

Karyn has been doing child welfare work for the state of Oregon since 1990. Lots of serious issues are involved, but Karyn noticed one that was often overlooked: the importance of keeping siblings together. In the 1990s she helped write a state policy that urges caseworkers to keep brothers and sisters together in foster care.

But sometimes it can't be done. "The larger the sibling group, the harder it is to keep them together," Karyn says. "I've had sibling groups of six."

She knew one in four children in foster care in Oregon were separated from siblings. She knew how much they missed each other.

Then, in 2000, she saw a woman named Lynn Price on "Oprah." Lynn was 8 when she learned she was living with foster parents and had a sister across town. Lynn grew up to create the first Camp To Belong, in Nevada, in 1995. Within a few years she'd opened more camps.

After Karyn Schimmels learned of the camps in 2000, she asked the unit of Children, Adults and Families, in Oregon's Department of Human Services, for permission to reunite some of Oregon's foster siblings at a Camp To Belong.

She raised the money herself, collecting funds from relatives for what she calls an "aerobithon," an intensive exercise program. She took her vacation and traveled in 2000 to California to be a volunteer

counselor at Camp To Belong in Fresno. "I took two brothers who had not seen each other in six years," Karyn says.

Together at last

The boys were 18 and 12 that summer. "They shared the same mother but had different fathers," Karyn says. "Their mother had been addicted to drugs and alcohol, and heavily involved in prostitution."

Since their mother had rarely been home, the older brother had assumed the parental role. "He was the one who made sure (his brother) got his shoes tied, got his backpack, got his lunch, got to school. He taught him the essentials of survival: to brush his teeth, to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

When their mother's parental rights were revoked, the older boy was adopted by his paternal grandparents in California. The younger boy was put in foster care in Oregon.

Their reunion in the Fresno airport turned into "one of the biggest dogpiles ever," Karyn says. "They picked up where they left off." When they arrived at camp the younger boy was wearing the things his brother had brought him as gifts. All week Karyn watched the boys, who were "joined at the hip."

"There were tears, talking about the painful experiences they'd had together. And tears from the older brother . . . who felt sad that (his brother) had really struggled without him."

Karyn saw the boy "mimicking his older brother, walking the same way, talking the same way, looking up to him. It was really sweet."

After camp the boys made it clear they wanted to see each other. They've spent spring break together ever since.

Karyn never looked back. In 2001 she took seven Oregon youths to camp. Every year she escorted more; in 2005 she took 22.

Bringing it all home

It was time to set up camp closer to home. Karyn worked with child welfare departments in Washington, Oregon and Idaho, and a group of volunteers. She applied for grants and stepped up her aerobithons.

Last year, Camp To Belong opened in Coeur d'Alene with 72 campers. This year there were 96. Once again, Karyn witnessed joyful reunions.

Children who don't remember brothers and sisters, who were infants when they were separated, get to meet people who share the same blood, who look like them.

Campers make special pillows and blankets for their siblings, with messages written on them. "Usually it's at nighttime that these kids miss their family of origin," Karyn says. "So after they leave camp they can hug that blanket. They can cry into that pillow."

But at camp, they're laughing. They sing songs, have a carnival night, take a cruise, play games, tell stories.

"I see a transformation in them," Karyn says. The children begin to understand "who they really are."

Karyn and the other volunteer counselors (the ratio is one adult for every three youths) "get as much as we give," she says. "Every year I get my cupful of wonderful memories, observing kids celebrating being together. It reminds me why I continue to work in child welfare and continue to want to make a difference."

She is making a difference. But she wants to bring more children, offer more camp sessions. To do that she needs volunteers and donations. (Go to www.ofpa.com and click on "Camp To Belong" to learn how to help.) So far, no one has stepped up and given millions, the way the fictional thieves did in the movie "Ocean's Thirteen."

If Karyn can raise enough money, fewer children will be turned away next year. And some may be invited back.

"The first year I didn't want to be here," said a young man named Logan as camp ended this year. "But now I want to be here every year until they tell me I can't come."