

## Camp To Belong brings foster kids together with real siblings

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By **Jessica Van Berkel, The Oregonian**



Zach, 15, and Angie, 16, are biological brother and sister who have been coming to Camp to Belong for four years. In years past they lived in separate homes and just recently have moved in together.

Haley shivers at lunch, still soaked from jumping in the pond. She smooths the quilt covering her lap, which bears a message from her brother, CJ, saying how much he loves her.

"It made me cry," she says, glancing first at the quilt, then at her brother, who is dipping his corn dog in ketchup on the bench beside her.

It is one of four times this year that the 12-year-old sister and 15-year-old brother will sit beside one another.

The dining hall of Camp Silver Creek is filled with 71 siblings, like Haley and CJ, who have been separated through foster care.

They are reunited for one week at **Camp To Belong**, which brings together children from across Oregon. CJ and Haley -- The Oregonian agreed to withhold last names for privacy and security reasons -- have been going to camp for years, but many others are first-timers. Some have not seen each other for more than five years.

The camp leaves childhood memories with siblings, showing them that "there can be positive family relationships in the absence of parents," said Charley Schimmels, who helps run the camp. This is the first year the camp has been held in Oregon. It is one of eight that span the United States, Canada and Australia, and three more are scheduled to open next summer.

Lynn Price, a former foster child who wanted to give back, founded Camp To Belong in 1995 in Las Vegas. Five years later, Karyn Schimmels, a child welfare training manager for the Oregon Department of Human Services, saw Price talking about the organization on The Oprah Winfrey Show.

That summer, she brought two foster children from Oregon to Price's camp. The next year she brought five, then 11. When she loaded 22 children on the plane headed to Denver, she decided it was time to take action in Oregon.

Schimmels and her husband Charley became "Mama K" and "Big Daddy." They lead campers through goofy skits, inspiration nights and chicken dances along with 40 volunteer counselors.

The counselors take time off work and pay their way to Oregon – traveling from as far as Texas, Chicago and Canada.

The camp relies heavily on volunteers and donors for time and materials. The camp costs about \$80,000 to put on, and while there is a \$500 suggested camper fee, the organization raises enough to cover those unable to pay.

"Sometimes we're fundraising in July for a camp that happened in June," Charley Schimmels says. Some children do not get enough to eat at home and have never been to a restaurant, says Jane Brady, a counselor who joined the organization after reading about it in a magazine. For volunteers like Brady, who travels from Dallas each year, the camp has a pull that makes them return year after year.

Katy Corlis, a camper for three years and now a counselor, says children in foster care often feel as though they're not going to amount to anything, that they're "just living life." The camp offers community and direction, and teaches foster children that they're not "second class," she says.

On the last evening of camp, Charley Schimmels repeats a common theme. "Your time in the system is this much," he says, holding his thumb and index finger two inches apart. Then he spreads his arms wide, "But your life is this big."

There were 8,617 children in foster care in Oregon in 2009, and 3,786 were part of a sibling group, according to the Department of Human Services. Of those siblings, 81 percent were placed with one or more of their brothers and sisters in foster care.

About 60 percent of families divided by foster care eventually are reunited and the percentage of reunited siblings is about the same, said Gene Evans, a Department of Human Services spokesman.

Zach, 15, and Angie, 16, are two campers who have been reunited. They have been living together for a few months but still return to Camp To Belong, a yearly tradition.

They share a table in the camp's dining hall with Haley, CJ and "Big Daddy." The group reminisces about years past and going tubing on the lake.

Big Daddy waves his arms frantically, re-enacting a camper falling off her tube, and Zach and Angie fall into

each another, giggling. The camp gives them a chance to focus on getting to know one another, Angie says.

At the end of camp, the group creates scrapbooks filled with photos they took with donated disposable cameras. Angie says she looks at her photo album throughout the year.

At the end of the meal, a few siblings stand before the group and give quilts and pillows they've made, reading the messages they wrote on them, like "I love you more than you know," and "You're the coolest, little man."

Corlis has kept every gift she received in her years at camp. When you don't know the next time you'll see your siblings, you treasure the blankets, she says.

"You aren't going to go home with them – but this will."

**-- Jessica Van Berkel**

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