

Sorren's S'more

How Going to Camp Shapes Us

by Alyie Dorko

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I passed my final level of American Red Cross swimming at summer camp. I remember the test: laps of butterfly, swum between our buoy lines on a day colder and wetter than the water. I was rewarded with the Level VII card and the first slice of the watermelon we cut into after.

I swam in high school.

I swam in college.

I swam this morning, open water swimming, Echo sun on my face before I went to work at Camp Beech Cliff.

Camp shapes us in a way that school and everyday summer doesn't. Camp is the memories, the skills, and the friendships that adults look fondly back on. As a child, an ordinary summer camp had an extraordinary effect on me. Camp did something valuable: it let me be myself, and it let me develop that self. Camp taught me the swim strokes I would later race. Camp taught me how to map trails, which stays with me today as a passion for being outdoors. At camp as a teenage counselor, I faked confidence that became realer each day I guided a group or had a camper confide in me. Camp was my safe place in the tempest of teenagedom.

The most profound effect camp had on me was through Sam, who ran arts and crafts by morning and lifeguarded by the light of the afternoon. One of the most unique individuals I have ever met – a tomboy cheerleader who lived at a stable with her mom – Sam was *cool*. I wanted to be that cool, but was too introverted to copy her outgoing personality. Rather, I realized at some point in college, what I actually wanted was not to be like Sam, but to be as unique an Alyie as Sam was a Sam.

For years, my favorite t-shirt was a too-big-for-me, navy blue Camp Podooc shirt. I got it when I was 12 – my first summer as a volunteer counselor – and stopped wearing it this spring at age 22, its fabric no longer recognizable as “shirt.” The specialness wasn't the buttery-soft material or bright white 'STAFF' letters (though I was proud to wear them), but the memories I felt when I pulled that shirt over my head, as warm on my back as the sun had been on my shoulders most of those days. A volunteer counselor, and a *liked* one at that, I had often been invited by older staff to swim with them across the lake at camp, play Uno, or come along on whatever adventure we dreamed up. I didn't have *low* self-esteem, but being liked by Sam and Brock – my co-counselor - made me feel pretty good.

Sam, Brock, and I worked at Camp Podooc for as long as we could. Older than I, they have already had to get 'real jobs.' After my first year at college and still enamored with camp, I found a job at Camp Beech Cliff.

We are lucky, we camp staff: while you work, we spend the day playing with your children. I have been a tuffett that your Little Miss Muffet sat on, and I saw your son's smile right before he flipped our sailboat. Adults often forget to play. Campers remind me every day how to do this. I make lanyards in Arts and Crafts. I play dodgeball in the mornings, do cannonballs off the dock, and I am still the girl who eats her lunch at snack time.

I'm not sure who has more fun here: the campers, or me. I mint Camper Bucks (Camp Beech Cliff has its own currency) and sell ice pops at lunch for two Camper Bucks apiece. I love the swarm of kids that gather around me after lunch, jumping in front of me like rabbits with colored "money" in their hands – "I want red!" "Blueblueblue, do you have anymore blue?!"

When I told my campers that they could spend Friday night at camp and we'd make s'mores, one asked me what a s'more was.

"We roast a marshmallow and sandwich it between chocolate and graham crackers," I grinned, thinking of the marshmallow cracking on its golden fire seams, spilling its sweetness over the chocolate and my fingers.

"I'm wheat- and dairy-free," he told me, and paused. "Do you think we could use rice crackers?"

Rice crackers. I haven't a name for the emotion that quivered inside me - *he's never had a s'more* - and an ache to find something more fun than a rice cracker for Sorren's s'more.

I called two major grocery stores in Ellsworth, two natural food stores on MDI, and finally tracked down gluten-free graham crackers, vegan-friendly marshmallows, and milk-free "milk" chocolate in Bangor.

I don't remember my first s'more, Sorren probably won't remember this one – nor will he know all the trouble I went through to get it – but I will. And this is why I keep coming back to camp: because when I swim I remember the best parts of my own childhood, and when I help campers make their first s'mores, I am a special part of theirs.