



Magic Moments at Camp

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

Heading off to summer camp, there's no way of knowing if, when or how the "magic of camp" will strike. Some kids return home with no grand realizations other than how much fun they had, which is, of course, magic enough. But others come back radiating confidence in a way that amazes their families and friends. Here are a few of those magic moments.

It's Not All About Soccer

Brian Quinn, director of the San Diego Sockers camp, recalls, "Toward the end of the week, I had the 6- and 7-year-old girls for our Mini World Cup competition. Kids that age just want to play. They have a fascination with winning but they don't really understand it. So we were playing this competitive game and my team was losing 2-0. At half-time I said, 'It's important that we go out and play hard and try to do well.'

"So we went out for the second half and scored our only goal. When the final whistle sounded they all came running to me, cheering 'We're the winners! We're the winners!' And I didn't have the heart to tell them [we didn't win], and it didn't matter. The fact was we were all winners. It was so uplifting for me. The soccer stuff becomes secondary as long as the kids enjoy themselves and they go away with an experience that stays with them."

Hoo-ah!

The Mountain Lake Chess Club has a day camp in Balboa Park and resident camps at Big Bear Lake and in Auburn, California. Larry Evans, the director, recalls, "Two years ago, we had an 11-year-old boy at our Auburn camp who didn't want to be there. He was very unpleasant and also a bully. He wasn't having a good time. I would have sworn that was going to be his one and only week at camp, ever. I wasn't even sure he was going to last a week.

"[Midweek] there's a team event called a Bug House Tournament. The kids hook up with a friend and after dinner they play for prizes and trophies. And as you might suspect, this boy didn't have any team-mates. So he was sulking in a corner as the event was starting. I went over and asked him if he would be my team-mate. He said yes and we won all of our games.

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After each game we stood up from the board and we bumped bellies in a triumphant motion and said, 'Hoo-ah!' With each win, his demeanor changed for the better. At the end of the competition he was one of the happiest children I've ever had at the camp. On Thursday and Friday he made friends. It was a 180-degree change. Ever since then he's enrolled even before our brochures go out. He's always the first one here, and he and I bump bellies and say, 'Hoo-ah!'”

First Words

A certain 2-year-old will always be remembered by Kathleen Gillie, director of Kindermusik's Adventure in Music Camp in Encinitas. “He came with his nanny to the mommy-and-me toddler class and wasn't talking yet. No one had heard him speak a word; not his mom, dad or nanny. They were beginning to discuss speech therapy. He was very shy, and clung to his nanny, reluctant to hold anyone else's hand. As the months went by, he warmed up in class a bit, but still no words. He would use signs to communicate and was very bright.

“One day I was singing our goodbye song and the children knew it was time for stickers, so they clamored around. Usually, this boy was the last one [to come to me]. That day I had new stickers, some colored dots with faces. Suddenly, he ran and jumped in my lap. He had never even let me hold his hand prior to that. His nanny just stood back and watched. He had never gotten that close to anyone else. I put a sticker or two on his hands and he seemed to like it. So I started putting lots of little dots all over his hands. Finally I said, 'What color would you like now?' He pointed to a green one and said 'Red.' So I sat there and continued to give him stickers as long as he wanted. His nanny said that that was the first word he'd ever said.

“You never know when the breakthroughs are going to happen. Of course, 2-year-olds aren't too clear on their colors yet, but he had the word 'red' and he knew it was a color. It was pretty amazing.”

She Found Her Voice

“The little girl I'm thinking of was 8, and very demure, sweet and soft-spoken,” says Kitty Franklin, director of Drama Kids International in San Diego. “Throughout the week the teacher was working with her on trying to develop and project her voice a bit louder. Every child progresses at a different rate and so you never know what the end result will be, especially in a short-term situation like camp.

“Well, towards the end of the week I was sitting in the back of the room doing paperwork and Miss Pam, our instructor, had the kids lined up doing their daily speech activity. I kept hearing this one voice louder than the others and I couldn't figure out who it was. So I walked around to the front of the class and there was this little girl. She had found her voice that day. She was projecting and leading the other kids and she had this bright smile on her face. That's a skill that's going to stay with her throughout her life.”

Camp gives kids the space to rise above their own expectations of themselves. It's a place to scoot over and try another way of being, to wander, and to wonder what might be possible “if I could only...” And the magic of camp is realizing, “I can.”

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