

The Boston Globe

**From the ashes, the laughter of children rises again
*Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, once aflame, is
ready to greet kids again***

By [Thomas Farragher](#) Globe Columnist



Attendees at the opening of the new Creative Complex at The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp admire the mosaic mural in the new building before the start of the ribbon cutting ceremony in Ashford, Conn. The building was destroyed in a fire two years ago. MARY MURPHY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

ASHFORD, Conn. – It has been more than two years ago now, but in his mind's eye David LaPorte can still see the ominous column of thick smoke rising from the magical summer camp that a blue-eyed movie star fashioned here in the woods of Connecticut.

Paul Newman founded this place – the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp – so seriously ill children with devastating medical conditions could, as he put it, “raise a little hell.”

And in February 2021, hell itself arrived at his retreat in the woods of eastern Connecticut, where so many kids had spotted constellations in the pitch-black night

summer sky and enjoyed roasting marshmallows stuck on the end of a simple stick collected from the surrounding woods.



Mosaic artist Mia Schon stood with the mosaic mural she designed at the opening of the new Creative Complex at The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. MARY MURPHY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“We started up Route 44 in the fire engine and I was in the front passenger seat,” LaPorte, an Ashford volunteer firefighter and EMT, told me here the other day. “So, as we’re coming up the hill, we’re looking for the smoke column and when we crested the hill we saw it and we knew we had a working fire.

A cruel, charcoal dagger plunged into the heart of a place that had been so alive with the laughter of children who so sorely needed that mirth, and those endless, carefree days under the warm summertime sun.

The cause of the fire was never established but its consequences were plain: the center of the camp fashioned to resemble an Old West town was gone along with an arts-and-crafts area, a camp store, and an educational kitchen.

“We didn’t know what caused it,” said Raymond A. Lamontagne, chairman of the camp’s board. “We found out it was probably mice eating through wires, which caused a spark. We were not using the building. There were no campers here.

“But the real heroes were the volunteer firefighters from, I think, five or six different units, who saved the dining hall and our infirmary. What was in the middle here burned to the ground. Nothing but ashes.”

And, now, out of those ashes, The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp has been reborn. It has risen again, ready to greet new campers who will fashion arts and crafts – and memories of a lifetime.

Campers like 13-year-old Amarey Brookshire, an eighth-grader from West Hartford, whose sickle cell disease can sometimes be an obstacle to friendships and the daily rhythms of life.

“Friendships are hard to maintain in school because the other kids don’t get it,” said Amarey’s mom, Amarilis Franjul. “They don’t understand why you’re out all the time. So to find friends here – and they’re friends like you – who get it and who understand? That’s really special.”

And that’s why so many people showed up here the other day to celebrate the camp’s new Creative Complex and to admire the mosaic masterpiece fashioned by Mia Schon, a Newton native now based in Israel, who learned how to create murals as a camp hospital outreach specialist.

She worked here at this camp during her college years from 2006-2008 and worked full-time from 2009 to 2012. So she knows something about the power of art. Her grandmother is Nancy Schön who created the famous “Make Way for Ducklings” sculpture in the Boston Public Garden.

“Mosaics are so symbolic,” she told me the other day here. “They’re made of broken pieces. We have challenges in life that break us and we have to put ourselves back together again.”

“They’re not going to be the same, but, hopefully, they can be beautiful in a new way.”

Beautiful is a good word for what has happened here. The resolve. The hard work. The breathtakingly beautiful result.

A camp put back together again. The result of impressive dedication.

“It was a movement from grief to gratitude,” said Jimmy Canton, the camp’s chief executive officer. “We know that the strength of the camp is a reflection of the strength of our community. We can only be as strong as the community around us. And, boy, did that community show up.”

He said that within a day after the fire, the camp had secured a million-dollar commitment from Travelers and the Travelers Championship, the annual professional golf tournament in Cromwell, Conn.

Within a week, that money had been matched by thousands of donors.

Days later, Newman's Own Foundation pledged another \$1 million.

"So this site is a reflection of our ability to rebuild (and it's) only because of the 4,500 people who stepped up in our time of need to allow us to rebuild," Canton said.

"Back in 1988, we served 288 children during the summer," he said. "In a typical year, we are used to serving about 1,100 children during the summer and then another 2,000 children and families in the fall and spring."

The kids will be back this year. They'll enjoy the nooks and crannies and the magic of places with names like Uncle Kasey's Korner, the Alley Cats Café and Cooking Zone, and the Grateful Heart Art Nook.

They'll make silly faces, find the shapes of animals in the clouds of summer, fall off to sleep after hearing another scary camp story, and craft priceless memories that will last a lifetime.

And, if they're lucky, they'll find the hidden secrets in Mia Schon's mosaic.

Secrets like what?

"This is hidden for kids," she told me. "This historic trap door. There's a song we sing about ice cream and cake. So that's sort of hidden. I put it in for them. It's at their height. I was trying to channel when I was a counselor here and I took kids to arts and crafts.

"What did I want them to see? How did I want them to interact with others? The fact that I worked here was sort of crucial to creating this piece. I knew the little traditions.

"I was thinking about the phrase: Camp is magic. The magic is in you. The *magic*. I really wanted to get this piece right."

And so, she did.