



Where special is an everyday thing

Hole in the Wall Gang Camp thrives 10 years after Paul Newman's death

By: Thomas Farragher

ASHFORD, Conn. — There's magic here in the woods of Northeastern Connecticut, and Lannette Bedgood spotted it immediately last week after a shy and sick little girl stepped into the special world a movie star conjured from the emerald landscape here 30 years ago.

"The second she got off the bus I thought: Wow! That's me," said Bedgood, a 20-year-old rising senior at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Like Bedgood, the little girl has sickle cell anemia, a painful disorder that causes red blood cells to deform into a sickle shape and stick to vessel walls.

Like Bedgood, the little girl was nervous and shy upon her arrival at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, founded by Paul Newman, who in 1988 breathed life into a place where he hoped sick kids could "raise a little hell."

Like Bedgood, a camp counselor from Brockton who was a camper here at age 11, the girl was transformed by the place — a transformation Lannette Bedgood described for me the other day as tears rolled down her cheek.

"I saw her coming in scared and shy," she said. "And I saw her leave with the biggest smile on her face and tears going down her face because she didn't want to leave. It's wonderful seeing the kids have this wonderful experience that you can't get anywhere else."



Camper Caroline and cabin counselor Sarah (right) acted out a scene before lunch at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp.

Photo: Erin Clark for the Boston Globe

Ten years after Newman's death, that still rings true.

The true wonder of this place? Its ability to project utter normalcy for kids whose childhoods have been anything but normal.

Yes, there are kids with prosthetic limbs, kids with canes, kids with cancer, and little boys and girls robbed of their eyesight or their mobility by cruel brain diseases that no little kid deserves.

But mostly there's this: kids being kids. Silly impromptu theater antics. A stable of quarter horses, including one named Sundance. Blocks of wood being shaped into race cars. And a couple of clowns for entertainment at lunch.

There's a fully staffed medical unit, but they don't wear stethoscopes because these kids have seen too many of those already. Oh, and it's all free.

"Many of them don't have friends who understand," said Sharon Space, the camp's medical director. "These are the kids who get left out at home. They get picked last for the baseball team. They don't get invited to birthday parties. Here, they're told they're awesome, and included."

Space was hired as a camp counselor at age 22 after a lunchtime meal of pizza with Newman, who dreamed of a place of fun and friendship. She has been serenaded on the camp's lake by two campers in a canoe. She has visited the horses with a boy who wanted to ride those animals so much he endured the needle in his arm that was required before he could make the trip.

She unsuccessfully fought back tears when a painfully shy girl screwed up enough courage to shout the final, triumphant line in a camp skit before a packed auditorium.

"I sat in the audience sobbing because it was just so powerful," Space told me the other day in her office here. "The camp created this place for her that she felt safe enough to do that. I called her mom and she said, 'There's no way.' And I said, 'No, she did it!'"

The camp's summer program runs for seven weeklong sessions for seriously ill kids from 7 to 15. There's one session for siblings. Contributions in 2016, the most recent year for which numbers are available, totaled \$12.6 million. Paul Newman died in 2008. His line of food and beverage products provides less than 1 percent of the camp's operating funds.

Still, his mischievousness and playful personality remain the undergirding of the culture of this 344-acre camp, where kids knew him as only a friendly guy with the brilliant smile, not the guy who once played Butch Cassidy, the wise-cracking leader of the cinematic Hole in the Wall Gang.

"He was anonymous when he was at camp and the campers would come up to him and say, 'Are you really Paul Newman? Why don't you act like him?'" said Jimmy Canton, the camp's chief executive, who has a master's degree in theology from the Yale Divinity School.

It's a degree that serves him well in a place that has a kind of spirituality about it. A place where counselors can count their blessings in the face of every kid in their cabins. A place where a kid with a bald head and a pronounced limp is just the boy in the bunk over.

"They can have true friendships with other children who really get it," said Canton, who has been with the camp since it began in 1988 when he worked here as a counselor. "That's where the healing comes from. They can have a slumber party. They can do things they never thought they could do. The healing comes from knowing you're not alone and that there's 100 other people just like you."

Katie Joiner knows that feeling. She was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer, in early 2013 at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester. The disease forced a leg amputation.

"People stare at me because it's very clear that something has happened in my life because of my prosthetic leg," said Joiner, a high school senior who plans to study bionics and prosthetics next year in college. "They'll ask all these questions: 'How did you lose your leg? Did you lose it in an accident?'

"I didn't have any hair so that made me stick out. And I came here and nobody was looking at me in a pitying way, or telling me how special or amazing and a miracle child that I was. Here you're told you're special. You're told you're amazing. Because you are."

That's a lot of special kids over the course of the summer. Some 1,000 across seven sessions, plus one for healthy siblings. That's a lot of magic going on.

Magic like this:

■ One camper invited all the kids in his school's classroom to his birthday party. No one showed up. So now he talks instead about the big birthday party the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp threw for him in the woods of Connecticut.

■ Or the sing-along at lunchtime the other day when smiling kids joined in knowingly to the lyrics of "Stand by Me."

When the night has come / And the land is dark / And the moon is the only light we'll see / No I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid / Just as long as you stand, stand by me.

■ Or this note, pinned on a camp corkboard that testified — in the unmistakable handwriting of a child — to the healing power of campfires, cabin stories, and special friendships:

I had a blast spending time with everyone at camp! It really made me forget about my troubles! Hole in the Wall was a safe haven for me. I could breathe at last.

That sounds exactly like the kind of place that Paul Newman, a big kid himself, had in mind.

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