Kindle Kids

Over the river and through the woods with HIV-affected youth

July 1, 2006 By Kellee Terrell

Rise and shine at Camp Kindle in Big Bear, California. In a moment, hikers will head for the hills while a few brave souls will dive into the freezing lake. But first, roughly half form a line—not for s'mores but for HIV meds. The weeklong camp hosts youngsters 7 to 18 who are either positive or have a positive family member. They get a dose of campfire storytelling and water fights, while learning how to live with the disease in a stigma-free environment.

"Camp gives kids an opportunity to bond with peers and increase self-esteem," says Eva Payne, 29, Kindle's founder and a mother of three. "It also promotes strict adherence to meds and [helps them] develop coping skills." Payne, a camp lover since the fourth grade and an AIDS activist since college, opened the first Camp Kindle, in Nebraska, in 1999; she added the California site in 2005. Both sites have full medical staffs.

The number of children born with HIV in the U.S. has decreased in the last ten years, but about 10,000 Americans under the age of 15 are infected. Meanwhile, higher rates of parental infection stoke kids' personal and social anxiety, as they fear being ostracized.

Payne recently created SPEAKOUT (Sharing Personal Experiences and Knowledge: Our Unique Truths), a traveling workshop that allows campers to reunite during the year and travel to schools around the country, empowering other students with their stories. She hopes to purchase a permanent home for Camp Kindle someday (she rents both sites now). In April, Payne pounded another tent peg toward that goal after winning a $25,000 humanitarian award from Volvo. "The camp is so important," says Leslie, the mother of Jasmine, a fifth-grade camper from the Midwest. "It's a week[long] sleepover, where Jasmine still takes her meds—and that puts me at ease."

Visit www.campkindle.org for more info 877-800-CAMP (2267)

TAKE IT OUTSIDE

Other top camps for kids living with HIV

Camp Amerikids

800.486.HELP

Besides the usual outdoorsy stuff, it offers spoken word and drama workshops for New York, New

Jersey and Connecticut area youth.
www.campamerikids.org

Camp Dreamcatcher
610.925.2998
Each August, children meet at this Pennsylvania site to enjoy activities such as basketball, boating, scavenger hunts and yoga therapy sessions.
www.campdreamcatcher.org

Camp Heart to Heart
502.833.3554
This Kentucky facility, 25 miles south of Louisville, encourages nature exploration.
www.campheartttoheart.com

Camp Laurel
626.683.0800
Mental, social and spiritual growth are the focus of this Southern California–based camp.
www.camplaurel.org

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