Young At Heartland

Happy 10th Birthday! A summer camp for kids with AIDS celebrates coming of age -- and so do its fastgrowing campers

July 1, 2002 By Katja Heinemann

Photographs not included, taken by Katja Heinemann

For three weeks each summer, a patch of wooded land in Willow River, Minnesota, is transformed into an oasis for children who have HIV and those whose families do. Here, often for the first time ever, these kids encounter unconditional acceptance and the awareness that they are not alone. Here, for seven singular days, these refugees from the concrete jungles of big-city America can share the secrets they try so hard to keep during the other 51 weeks of the year.

The well-named Camp Heartland came into the world with an impromptu bang in the summer of 1993, when 75 children were invited to "spend the best week of their lives." They had Neil Willenson to thank for that -- Willenson had just happened to find out that a friend, age 7, was barred from "normal" summer camps because he had HIV, and the hot-headed 23-year-old decided to do something about it. Now, after years of itinerant summers at rented campsites all over the country, Heartland has finally settled into a permanent home, and this year welcomes some 400 children to celebrate its 10th birthday.

Camp Heartland can't help but profoundly affect anyone who spends time there. The woman from the neighboring farm who was once petrified of getting HIV from an errant mosquito now cooks for a swarm of hungry HIVers. Cornfed counselors, young, white and earnest, learn everything from how to braid cornrows to lessons in mortality. And their teachers, the even younger campers, find fresh air, friendship and freedom from their adult-sized worries.

Not every camper you will meet has HIV. Some are their brothers and sisters, or kids who have lost an entire family to AIDS. Others were given up by positive parents and now live in foster homes. There are kids who at 10 carry all the responsibilities of their household due to Mom's illness, and teens who had never planned for a future they thought HIV would deny them. Here at Heartland all these children of a harder God can share their tears and fears and find smiling mirrors of their own lonely struggles.

"Sometimes I like to forget I have HIV. When people ask me about it, I'm just like, 'Oh yeah, I still have that.'"

-- Jimiya

Just Another Dose:
Diamond, 8, takes his many HIV meds in liquid form -- the pills are too hard to swallow. An estimated 10,000 children in the United States are living with HIV. With women of color among the hardest hit by the virus, 85 percent of Heartland's campers are African American or Latino. Thanks to HAART, many who were expected to die before they were walking or talking are now poised to leap into the rough waves of adolescence.

"One day my mom told me the only thing that could get rid of HIV was Clorox. I said, 'Can't they make a pill out of it, and take whatever it is out of our intestines?' She said no, and so did my doctor. But I told them I'm going to become a Doctor and figure it out."

-- John

Make A Wish:
Twins Sheridan (left) and Shane, whose mother has HIV, on their 14th birthday. Both boys are negative. "When my mom had HIV, they were gonna try to take me and Shane away," Sheridan says . "But it would have been like taking another piece of her away, and she'd feel more tired and sick, and then she would have probably ended up killing herself or dying."

How I Spent My Summer Vacation:
1. Two swingers.
2. Brandon, 13, and Rebecca, 11, a brother and sister who were adopted after their HIV positive mom could no longer take care of them. Brandon got HIV at birth; Rebecca did not.
3. Steven, 12, hams it up for the camera.
4. A camper draws out the moment before taking her pills, which serve as a daily (or more) reminder of her illness. The meds -- and their side effects -- are often the only physical manifestation of an otherwise-invisible illness. As such, the meds are the only palpable presence that the kids can rebel against.
5. Lesley, 10, has a quiet moment.
6. On her way back home, Patricia, 10, takes a last look at Camp Heartland. Departing is tough on the kids, so counselors work to assure that connections with and among the kids extend beyond the one week.
7. Boys at play in "Water World," a safer substitute for the bacteria-ridden local lake, where campers canoe and fish but don't swim. Many camp activities are aimed at improving body image while embracing plain, old-fashioned fun.
8. John, 12, is the future AIDS doc quoted on the previous page.
9. To which fellow camper is 12-year-old "Lisa" writing so intently?

All You Need Is Trust:
Donte (right), 9, is Tinkerbell on "Cross-Dressing Day." There are daily dress-up activities such as nerd lunch, pajama breakfast and miss-match hour. Camp Heartland is a parallel universe where the activities echo those at other summer camps -- basketball, dance, arts and crafts, canoeing -- but are carefully planned to enhance feelings of acceptance so crucial to kids with HIV, who often feel stigmatized and isolated in their daily lives. A cornerstone is the private rap sessions in each cabin before bedtime, where campers share their feelings, including grief and loss. The cry *I want*

my mommy has a different meaning here, where many campers have lost a parent to AIDS.

Attention Must Be Paid:
Cardell (left), 13. “At 9, my mom told me, ’Mommy is very, very sick. You take care of mommy and make sure she take her medicine,’” Cardell says, recalling how he gradually learned that his mother was HIV positive. "When I was 10, it was like, ’Mommy has a bad, bad sore, and she need a lot of help to get rid of it.’ At 11, it was ’Mommy has a really, really bad problem.’ At 12, it was ’Mommy has a disease.’ And now I’m like, ’All right. Mommy has HIV and I’m not gonna let it grow. *Straight up.* There ain’t gonna be any ’OK, Mommy’ no more. It’s gonna be, ’Yo, you gonna live, and that’s that.’"

Born To Run:
Eric (right), 12, completes his jog through a circle of hugs and high-fives from volunteers and staff during the camp’s closing ceremony.

Illness, Why do I have this illness? Where it come from? How did I get it? Is there a cure? Why does it have to be a secret from relatives and friends? How long does this illness last? A lifetime. Do I have to live my life in lies? Why? Why? Why? I wish there was no HIV/AIDS virus.The illness is making my life terrible. All these questions are in my head, I can only express on paper, not to anyone else.

-- A poem by Britani, 13

Some Dance To Remember:
Lesley (left), 12, and Shane, 14, record their romance on “MTV Night,” a favorite dance social. Crushes develop easily at Heartland. The campers have a chance to express their affection without having to fear rejection because they have HIV. Older campers are offered “Real World,” a sex-education discussion, and referred to the nurse or a social worker for further consultation. While the camp does not condone sexual activity, Heartland provides year-round services to help campers address a myriad of issues including sexual health, housing and career development.

“If you have a girlfriend, they’d be like, ’Oh my God, you never told me your mom had it,’ and then they overreact and say: ’Oh my God, you have it, too.’ It’s like, ’No, I don’t have it because my mom got it after we were born.’ And then they’re like, ’but you still could’ve got it from kissing and hugging them.’ You’re all wrong: You can’t get it from hugging, you can’t get it from kissing and you can’t get it from saliva. Unless you drink about two gallons of the person’s saliva, and that’d be gross, and you’d never get to drink that much.”

-- Sheridan, 14

“My auntie, she used to wake up and cry on my birthday because the doctor said I wasgonna die at the age of 6. But after I passed the age of 6, that’s when we started celebrating my birthday.”

-- LaToya

Reach For The Sky:

LaToya, 13, has a knack for words (see quote above) and has become a national speaker on AIDS. “A lot of times, at their homes, being sick ends up lowering the expectations that are placed upon these kids,” says Susan Abbot, a former social worker at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago who refers kids to the camp. “At Heartland, they really push the kids to do things they might not try otherwise.” Founder Neil Willenson believes that the emotional effect of camp helps the kids cope throughout the year, contributing to their survival and sense of hope.

Hide In Plain View:
Accompanied by Sweety, the camp dog, a boy carries his IV gastro-bag, for those incapable of orally ingesting meds. Even in the safe world of Camp Heartland, children can still feel ashamed of AIDS and its trappings -- and try to hide them. This boy’s heart isn’t in it.

Paint (Not) By Number:
Tabius, 12, and her skull-and-bones tattoo. When encouraged the kids show great courage -- and gallows humor -- with their creativity.

Camp Heartland offers three weeklong summer-camp sessions in Minnesota in July and two in Malibu, California, in August. Its year-round services include weekend reunions, a hotline and follow-up with families, as well as the Journey of Hope peer-education program. For information, call 1.800.724.HOPE, or click on www.campheartland.org.

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