

In Our Community, We Count the Balloons

George Downs

We anxiously peer across the campfire ring at each other, scanning for familiar faces, hoping, really. It is always difficult to accept reality. We gather after families have gone, after the check-in teeming with medications and treatment protocols, and passionate hugs after our year apart. Amy, the camp director, approaches down the gravel road already christened with popped water balloon skins and stained with dropped snow cones. She welcomes us back, holding three balloons. Those three balloons mean three more of our dearest friends have lost their battle with cancer. It is not fair. We are all far too familiar with this feeling. Some years are worse than others with more balloons and more friends. I can only recall one year when Amy carried just one balloon, a small victory.

I have attended this camp for eight summers as a survivor of childhood leukemia. I have lost dozens of friends, most recently two weeks ago. Jesse had been in remission for years and within two weeks of relapse, he was gone. Another end to a friend's life. I grew up with 150 campers, all at various stages of treatment--whether palliative, wheelchair-bound or recovering. I am fortunate; I endured 40 months of chemotherapy and the loss of my hair. Moreover, I continuously remain in good health.

As I have matured, my appreciation has grown for the community that makes it possible for kids with cancer to be kids again--even if they may still be hindered by some medical obstacles. I see the staff donating their vacation time to be with us, the restaurants who feed everyone, or the college sport teams that visit and dub us "the heroes." All of these people care so deeply and make a difference in our lives because they understand the minuscule amount

being done for children with cancer, when compared to adults in terms of research. Most important, I recognized the hope I represent to sick campers and their families when they see survivors with hair and full of energy no longer burdened by illness.

During treatment, I received endless love that still has yet to cease. After the initial years of camp, I concentrated my attention on those still struggling. I did so not in the sense of chore, but as a friend--because I have experienced the support, kindness and selflessness that forms our genuine, familial community. This community had come to mean everything to me. I have grown into someone who understands the fragility of life and the value of our limited time. I know the support of a community is indescribably life-saving. Each year, those balloons make it difficult to return to camp. But I know the reward of giving back is invaluable to the campers and myself. In 2017 for the culmination of my Boy Scout career I built nine benches and a new fire pit for my Eagle Scout project. This is my way of being part of one of our camp's sacred spaces until I can return as a companion.