

**Hope Grows Here.**

**30500 Brantley Branch Road**

**Eustis, FL 32736**

**Summer 2012**

 Hi y’all! (The expression I have learned from my peers while living in Florida)

So far this summer has been THE BEST summer of my life! I have spent the last two months as a camp counselor and the pool supervisor at Florida’s Camp Boggy Creek. Each session, I have the blessing of getting extremely close with the 10 campers that live in my cabin, as well as being able to see all the kids play and pass their swim tests at the Shamu Pool (which is donated by Sea World)! ☺ The days are extremely busy and packed with many activities but every single second is well worth the end of the day’s exhaustion. This camp celebrates the life of the World’s Greatest Children that have serious illnesses and gives these children a place where they can come and feel safe, loved, and respected.

There is so much to do at this camp that is founded by Paul Newman. We have the beautiful Shamu pool; a theatre donated by Universal Studios; a tower that has team building activities and a rock wall; an Arts and Crafts gallery; a gym donated by the Orlando Magic; 11 beautiful horses, a nature barn with pigs, donkeys, goats, and cows; a lake to boat and fish on; and archery.

 Every night of camp we have a different activity as well after the day is over. The first night we have an opening campfire to bring in the theme and find out what the kids wish to accomplish for the week. The second night is usually Carnival Night where we have games, face painting, and fun. The next night is Silly Olympics and we get to eat Spaghetti with our faces and have a food fight in the rec field. Our fourth night is Stage Night in the Theatre, which gives the campers a chance to express themselves on stage and receive standing ovations. The fifth night is Dance night in the Dining Hall. The last night is the banquet, where we all come together for a banquet and to celebrate the week we had together.

**SESSION 1-HEART WEEK.** This week was populated with 150 campers that suffer from heart diseases. The theme this week was Superheroes, so all week long we dressed up as superheroes to celebrate the lives of our own heroes at camp. At the opening campfire several campers worked to define what a **“hero”** was. One of the youngest campers defined a hero as having wounds of courage instead of scars. And that very next day of camp, I was moved even more since the norm was to have a huge scar running through the middle of your chest. Every camper noticed that about one another and immediately felt loved and able to finally fit in. At the end of the week, my co-counselors and I have a flower that makes up our very own Hope’s Garden on the wall of our cabin and each one of our campers have a petal to respond to the question we ask. Our question was **“What makes CBC different from the outside world**?” An example of one of the responses to this question is below:

 “CBC is truly my home away from home, my escape from reality like the doctor visits, shots, blood work, and having to worry about making sure I do everything I can to keep living life to the fullest. Home is great don’t get me wrong, but kids at my school do not understand the struggles I go through each and every day, the pain and sadness I sometimes feel when I realize I’m not like every other kid but at Boggy we all are here for the same reason, we become one. Most have a badge of courage. It shows how brave and strong each one of us are. These girls I absolutely consider my family.”

**SESSION 2-IMMUNODEFICIENCY, JUVENILE RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS, AND INFLAMATORY BOWEL DISEASE.** The theme this week was Birthday. There were 135 campers this week to celebrate the 17th Birthday of Boggy. However, there were two campers where I became extremely close with and here are their stories.

**Lance**

Lance is a little boy that taught me the value of loving others and life in an unconditional manner. Two months prior to camp, he lost his father. He had also been battling a battle himself by going to the hospital 6 times the past 9 months, two of these visits where he almost died, and another one of these was 2 days before camp. He recently had to start chemotherapy treatments because of his immune system. You would never know this about Lance because he had a special spirit. He lead many camp cheers, was always smiling and laughing, loved to dance with me, and thanked me several times for helping him try to pass his swim test. Lance gave me a token of Hope so I could always remember him and I wear this every day.

**Isabel**

Isabel was another angel. Both of her parents died from AIDS and so she previously lived in a foster home until her older sister was stable enough to take care of her. Her sister recently took her in. What was special about her is that every night before bed, she would get out and tackle me to the ground and tell me how much she loved me. At the end of the week she thanked me because she has never been loved nor had the opportunity to experience it.

**SESSION 3-CANCER.** This week’s theme was Aloha and we were to establish an Ohana within the camp. There were 139 campers, and the majority of them had blood and bone cancers. This week I had the youngest campers (ages 7-9). At the opening campfire, there were many touching things that they said. When our camp director asked them what they were most looking forward to this week, there were a couple of answers that stood out to me by the campers that I had in my cabin. One was, **“to have fun because I have cancer.”** Another **was “to forget that I have cancer.”** However, the most powerful one came from an 8 year old boy that was currently on treatment and said,

 “At camp I want to have fun so when I’m at my chemo treatments next week, I think of fun times and my friends instead of the pain.”

This session was a special time for me, not because I got to work with kids that I have passion for but I got to reconnect with a place that has my heart—Haiti. As I promised many students that I worked with in Haiti, I WOULD see them again…somewhere down the road but I never thought that it would be so soon. This week I was blessed with the opportunity to connect with one of these students; she comes to the United States for her treatment. That beautiful moment is one I will never forget.

**SESSION 4-HEMOPHILIA AND JUVENILE RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS.** The theme this week was Hollywood week, but the special thing about this session was that there was an infusion class offered so the campers could learn how to infuse themselves! It was so exciting and interesting to watch young campers learn how to do something that big to their selves to take that initiative step of living independently. In my cabin, I had the oldest campers and it was very sad because it was the last year of camp for most of them. One of the kids that touched my heart was a 16 year old boy named Zack. Zack was just one of 24 children in his family. He lives in a group home because his mother gave him up in England. I have never seen a child need or get camp as much as Zack. Zack had the most passion for life I have ever seen before. He was extremely thankful for everything he has been through, and it was so beautiful to see him share that love with others. On the last night of camp, he went up to the microphone and spoke…

“Most people are excited to go home tomorrow, but I am actually leaving home.”

Zack inspired many campers; however, most of all, he inspired me.

**SESSION 5-EPILEPSY.** Western Week. This session had been the most exhausting and hardest session of the summer, but it was also a time where I grew tremendously in my strength. I had ten girls that were 17 years old, but they functioned at 9 years of age. There were also four girls in my cabin that required one to one attention. It took a lot of work and patience to survive the week, but these young women were the funniest people I have ever been around. It was just the simplest things they said that made me laugh, and the majority of the time, they did not even know that they were being funny. Just to relate…one of our girls was obsessed with great white sharks, another was obsessed with fairies, and then there were some that wanted to be cowboys, princesses, and even tigers when they grew up. But at the end of the week, it was concluded that camp really meant something to them. When we asked the girls to write or draw something that describes Camp Boggy Creek, there were the answers of a shark, a fairy, and the word:

 **Heaven.**

**SESSION 6-CANCER.** The theme this week was OLYMPICS! Go USA! There were 150 campers and in my cabin, I had ten 12 year olds. This week was magical to me and I was close with my whole cabin. Every single girl was so sweet and had been through more than I could ever imagine going through, but they all taught me one thing: the concept of living strong. One of my campers this week had brain surgery a week before she came, another was on treatment, and then there was one that will forever be in my prayers. This 12 year old girl was never close to someone in her life before, but she opened up to my co-counselors and I. All throughout the week she would talk about how much she missed her siblings and her baby brother that died. We also had many conversations about scars and she would always point to a scar on her upper chest of which I thought was from a port. One day she told me that she was not proud of this scar even after I told her that it demonstrates strength and an award of survival. This scar definitely was one of survival but not from cancer. It was the scar from the homicide event that had killed her baby brother; it was something that I made sure she knew to be an angel’s kiss.

**Kyarra**

Kyarra was another beautiful camper I had this past week. She recently relapsed and did not have a lot of strength. On the last day of camp, she told everyone that her high for the past week was that she got to finally have fun with people that loved her. On the other side, her low was that as soon as she got home, she would be returning to her chemotherapy treatments where she said that she would be staying in the hospital for many nights.

I know that this session would touch my heart because there were many stories of previous campers that we celebrate their lives for. One of them was a little boy named Cade. Cade had brain surgery the week before he came to camp last year, but when Cade walked into the pool area he noticed that there were no other kids that had stiches running along his head or with a swim cap on. Well, the next day that Cade came to the pool he was in shock. Every single camper and staff member had on a shower cap just so Cade could feel loved and able to fit in. Cade embraced the struggle the majority of the year, but in May he became very weak. He had laid in bed for five days in pain and would not even say a word to his family, but when three of his old counselors came to visit him in the hospital, Cade immediately fought the pain and sprang up to welcome them. Cade tried to fight all he could so that he could return back to the place he loved, back to Camp Boggy Creek, but he came up short. That was Cade’s first time at camp, but it was also his last. There is not a day where we do not celebrate the life of this little angel.

**SESSION 7-BLENDED.** Paul Newman week. We had a total 147 campers with severe asthma, spina bifida, renal disorders, cranial facial, cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, and transplants. This week was very exciting, and I had the opportunity to witness two miracles. The first happened on the second day of camp. One of our campers, Christina, had been on dialysis for a long time and had been waiting for a kidney. It was such a beautiful thing to see Christina receive the news that a kidney had finally been found and that the very next day she would be getting a transplant! Christina’s family came and picked her up and she was off to Tampa General Hospital to receive her kidney! Christina’s days of dialysis are finally over!

The second miracle was one of a different kind, and a different perspective. This came about from a little girl by the name of Rachel. Rachel was not the typical camper. She had recently had a transplant, which allowed her to come to Camp Boggy Creek. Rachel saw life through a whole different world, and it was absolutely breathtaking. What was unique about Rachel was that she was blind. She walked around campus by the aid of one of her counselors and a stick in the other hand. When she would go up to the microphone, she would get everyone’s attention with a big “OH YEAH!”, and she could tell anyone apart…not by the sound of their voice either. Rachel used touch to distinguish everyone. She would grab onto people’s elbows, and she knew exactly who you were! Rachel is beautiful.

**SESSION 8-SICKLE CELL.** Tacky Tourist week. This week was one of the best to end the summer on, but it was also one of the hardest. Before camp, I had never experienced seeing someone suffer from sickle cell pain. However, this week, I witnessed many of my campers that had to be in the patch for hours because of the pain that they were in. The feeling of not being able to do anything for them is unbearable. It is hard to watch all these kids be in pain for hours upon hours and have all this time taken away from their life. But on the other side, they were able to interact with other campers just like them and have a wonderful week together.

This summer I have gained some of the best friends that have become my family. We have been through just about everything together and together we make up a strong, everlasting unit. We share something special, and it all deals with the camp spirit that I wish everyone had the opportunity to experience.

Aside from camp, I have had the opportunity to travel all over Florida and even Georgia! I have been to the Wekiwa Springs; Orlando; Cocoa Beach; Vero Beach; Tampa; Treasure Island; Sea World; and Albany, Georgia. I even learned how to surf and got stung by a scorpion!

Besides experiencing a couple tropical storms and my first hurricane, I have also sacrificed a lot this summer. I took an online Genetics class for the first part of camp and then I was off to study for my MCAT. All of this studying became very stressful and made me very unhappy with myself. I decided to postpone my dream of Medical School another year so I could live in the present and be there 100% for these kids that need my love. The only time I had for myself was from 12-6am and I tried to spend that time resting to recharge for the next day. At first I was very upset with my decision, but there were many blessings that came right after that gave me confidence that I made the right choice. I have had the opportunity to work with many Medical Students because they come and volunteer here at camp. I guess it is required by some of the Florida Med Schools to get this type of experience with kids, so in the long run—I am ahead of the game. I am not just volunteering a week of my time here with these beautiful kids, but my whole summer. I was chosen to make the best of my position, as I was picked to be one of the 50 summer staff members. I have also gotten the opportunity to talk to many prestigious Medical Doctors from Mayo Clinic, Arnold Palmer, and Shands. I even was given the opportunity to talk to some Medical Admission Directors, all which gave me advice on what their school looks for in their applicants.

As you can see, there are so many beautiful children that have touched my heart this summer. It is so hard to think that I only have two more sessions before it is all over and I have to leave “home”. This is one summer that I will truly never forget, and I wish to come back again next summer to see all of my campers again. The hardest days are seeing the campers leave from the camp’s gates because you never really know if they will have the chance to come back or you think of how they have to return to their life outside of camp. But I can assure you that these campers take a part of me with them, and they will never truly leave my heart.

Thank you for all of your Encouragement, Support, & Prayers,

**Jess**

**jessica.withey@loras.edu**

**(715) 661-1983**

**“I’ve heard it said that you can leave camp, but camp never really leaves you.”**

**Paul Newman**