

Camp New Friends

Monday July 22, 2013, 8:00p.m. My friends and I were sitting on the wooden floor of cabin 35 in a circle. In the middle sat bowls of Goldfish crackers, Twizzlers, Lays' potato chips and M&Ms. As we snacked, we all talked about our differences; stutter, learning disabilities, brain tumors, optic nerve tumors or our café au lait "spots." They all had one thing in common: the symptoms of Neurofibromatosis-a genetic condition we all possess.

For the past nine summers, I have attended the same camp, Camp Young Judaea-Texas. This past summer was no different, but I also went to another camp: [Brainy Camps](#). Every week for nine weeks during the summer, Brainy Camps sponsors separate camps for children with diseases, genetic conditions, disadvantages, or other features that distinguish them. In July, Brainy Camps made one of my oldest dreams come true.

For as long as I can remember, I have always wanted to meet one of 85,000 people-- American youth, like me, who have the genetic disorder called Neurofibromatosis (NF). Every so often, I hear about another teen living with NF, but it is not the same as meeting him or her. Whenever I was going through medical testing, regular check-ups, or even in my every-day life, I felt alone. This summer, I attended [Camp New Friends](#), Brainy Camp's week-long session for kids with NF. I met nearly sixty-five other children, teens, and adults just like me. I found what I had always wanted-someone like me.

From the moment I arrived I noticed campers who looked different, all showing signs and symptoms of NF. This included [optic gliomas](#) (tumors on the optic nerve), freckling, bone abnormalities, or even as NF kids call them, "spots." I had never seen anything like it before. I couldn't tell just by looking that other campers had NF. These kids were more like me with tumors, motor and social skills issues, and learning disabilities-internal problems. These things aren't visible from the outside. Although our symptoms were unique, we were all the same.

The first morning, after our "late night snack-talk", the real fun began. The camp felt like a "normal" camp-no different. It was impossible to tell that we all had a condition. There were activities--basketball, softball, swimming, theatre, archery, arts and crafts, rock climbing, tennis and more. Each day, we would pick four activities, and participate in each for an hour, with an additional lunch and rest break. For the majority of the time, I forgot that we were different from other kids.

On the second evening, we were divided by age and gender. In my group, high school girls, we first picked a rock that we liked from the camp lake. Next, we looked through magazines and cut out words that we thought described ourselves. We then dipped them in

Modge Podge clear glue, and stuck them on our rocks. When we completed the project and the rocks were dry, we went around the table and talked about our top three words.

We also talked about how living with NF made us feel. Most of us selected the words “alone” or “different” or “sick” for our rocks. We talked about our issues at home, at school, with other kids, or even with our families. When I heard campers talking about how hard it was to have a childhood full of medical testing, appointments, therapy, specialists and doctors, I understood exactly what they were talking about, and how they felt going through it all. When I talked about my MRIs or CT scans, I didn’t have to explain what they were, for the other girls knew the same, if not more about those tests than I do. I had a feeling inside of me that I had never felt before—a feeling of acceptance, belonging, and connection. It felt great!

The counselors explained how if we were to just look around, we would realize that we weren’t sick, or different, just special. They also suggested that if we were feeling lonely, to just think about all the friends we had made so far at camp. We all understood each other in a sort of telepathic way.

Because the counselors understood that we all felt bad about ourselves much of the time, on the last night of camp, at the banquet, each bunk’s counselors went on to the stage and announced a unique, creative award for each camper in his/her cabin. The younger campers received awards such as Best at Yoyo, Best at Sharing or Cutest Hair Styles. The older campers were awarded Most Compassionate, Most Thoughtful, or mine, Most Knowledgeable about NF. These made us feel as if we were loved and regular kids, not those with a life-long condition that affects one in 3,000.

The day I got home, I already had at least ten friend requests and invitations to join the Camp New Friends group on Facebook. Now, almost every day, I talk to my new friends. It is so enchanting to stay in touch with all of my new NF buddies. Whenever I feel alone, I think of my summer at camp, and the most important thing I learned: don’t feel alone, there is always someone out there just like me!

Elana