

Wheatley Heights camp caters to kids with cancer

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One recent afternoon, up the hill from the picnic tables, just feet from the beach towels crumpled on the grass and the flip-flops thrown nearby, children laughed.

The sound is common at summer camps, and at Sunrise Day Camp in Wheatley Heights, it was pool time. So along with the laughter came the shouts and splashes of kids enjoying relief from scorching temperatures.

But for the kids at Sunrise, camp is about much more than fun in the pool.

"It's not really a camp, it's like a miracle," said Camila Korobow, 12, of [Melville](#). "It's amazing; we share our stories and sometimes we laugh about it because we know we have each other."

Now in its fifth season, Sunrise bills itself as the nation's only full summer day camp for kids with cancer and their siblings. Camila has battled brain cancer most of her life. Before Sunrise, she did not have many friends.

"The way people look at you, they don't look at you for what you have to give personality-wise," she said. "They look at you for what you have, the disease." The stares and teases made her "just want to feel normal." Sunrise did that, she said.

At Sunrise, shunts and incision scars are as prevalent and accepted as scraped knees and dirty elbows at other camps. Counselors and kids are encouraged to wear hats and bandannas to make those who have lost their hair to treatment feel less conspicuous.

Joy and childhood

"We don't want any child to ever feel like an outsider," said executive director Michele Vernon. "We're out just to provide the most normal experience for these children and bring them joy and bring their childhood back."

Run by the Friedberg Jewish Community Center in [Oceanside](#), Sunrise is free. Buses pick up children ages 3 1/2 to 16 from as far away as the [Bronx](#). There are standard camp activities, including arts and crafts, tennis and soccer. But some are modified: Volleyballs are soft, no contact sports allowed. Programs are designed so that children who miss a day due to illness do not feel as though they are missing out.

Three nurses and a doctor are available daily. Counselors are trained in the medical and psychological aspects of cancer patients.

The camp has 15 counselors who are childhood cancer survivors, including Kate Herzlin, 18, of Rockville Centre. "It means a lot to me to show them they can move on, that, yes, cancer is a part of me and it will always be, but there's a lot more to me than just being a survivor," she said.

Kids and parents alike said the camp has become a second home. Linda Calvin, 44, whose 6-year-old son Colby's leukemia was diagnosed in 2005, said she enjoys meeting parents as they drop off their kids and hearing their stories. Seeing children who have been off treatments for years has also given her hope, she said.

"It has benefits for the whole family," she said. "I can't tell you what a great sense of normal it gives us."

The camp, which works with 12 local hospitals, has nearly quadrupled since it opened in 2006. Arnie Preminger, president and chief executive of the Friedberg JCC, said organizers knew kids would love the camp. "What we didn't expect is the impact it has had on not just the children, but on the staff, the families, the doctors," he said. "It fulfills needs on so many levels we never realized when we opened."

In August another camp will open in [Israel](#), he said.

Siblings benefit, too

Siblings, often left out while attention is focused on the sick child, also benefit.

When her sister Caroline, 10, was found to have leukemia in 2002, Lisette Watters, 12, of South Ozone Park, said she didn't understand what was going on. "I felt kind of abandoned by my family in a way," she said.

But at Sunrise, where the pair have been campers since it opened, she gets to share time with her sister, to whom she donated bone marrow. "What's great is we don't feel different here," she said. "We all feel the same. . . . It's just a really close connection."

For Lisette, the only bad part of camp is the last day. "It's sad," she said. "But then I remember there's always next summer."

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