

Camp helps burn survivors

Now in its ninth year, Brave Hearts Camp lets participants have fun, build self-esteem

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When the kayak relay race began, you couldn't help but notice the scars.

But after a few minutes of watching the campers madly paddling across the lake, all you could see were the smiles.

Not dutiful grins, mind you, but radiant sunbursts - illuminating their faces like flashlights in a cave.

The participants were among the 34 campers attending this week's Brave Hearts Camp in Brown County, now in its ninth year.

The camp is sponsored by the People's Burn Foundation, an Indianapolis-based agency funded solely by donations that cover the \$450-per-camper cost.

Most of the campers, ages 4 through 32, are from Indiana - though a few are from Florida.

The camp is designed to provide fun, challenges and self-esteem building for campers whose bodies bear the scars of terrible ordeals, and whose spirits struggle with the challenge of being looked upon as different.

"The camp helps them move past their skin," said Shawn Longerich, executive director of the People's Burn Foundation. "Several kids came here very quiet and isolated, and now they're chattering like magpies."

At the camp, which began Sunday and ends today, participants swam, went horseback riding and tackled a challenge course.

"We challenge them," Longerich said. "When you meet and overcome a challenge, it boosts your self-esteem."

Longerich said that for the past three summers, she had tried, without success, to persuade Kierra - now 16 - to climb into a harness and walk across a rope bridge suspended 25 feet above the ground.

"Yesterday, she came up to me beaming," Longerich said. "She said, 'You always said I could do it, but I didn't believe you. Well, today I did it.'"

Emotional healing

To foster emotional healing, the campers have one-on-one therapy sessions with Lora Hays - a licensed marriage and family therapist and registered play therapist.



Trevor Harkenrider tumbles into the lake during a team kayak race Thursday at Brave Hearts Camp for burn victims. David Snodgress | Herald-Times

"They look in the mirror and conclude they're worthless," Hays said. "Being called Freddy Krueger and Crispy Critter by their classmates just reinforces that."

She said most have a lot of bottled-up anger - about why they were burned in the first place and about their ongoing skin grafts.

"First, the grafts are painful," she said. "Second, it takes time. While friends are going on spring vacation or summer vacation, they're recovering from another surgery."

Longerich said one of the campers - a 7-year-old girl who suffered massive burns in a house fire - has already had more than 40 surgeries.

TV anchor is burn survivor

One of the 30 counselors at the camp was Jennifer Carmack, a weekend anchorwoman for Channel 6 TV.

Three summers ago, she visited the camp to do a report.

"I had a flood of emotions," she said. "I realized how much I had suppressed as a burn survivor myself."

At age 9, Carmack suffered second- and third-degree burns on her face, shoulders and hands when she bumped into her mother as she was pouring hot bacon grease into a can.

She still has a faint scar above her left eye.

Last year, Carmack spent two days as a counselor at the camp. This year, she's been a counselor all week.

"This week has been life changing," she said. "I've never before felt such a sense of purpose."

While she was recovering from her burns, Carmack was called "Scarface" and "Hamburger face" by some classmates.

"I understand these kids' pain," she said. "And because I don't have to turn off my emotions as a TV reporter, I can relate to them as a human being, and my heart can hear their stories."

At the end of the week, a teenage girl who'd suffered burns on 80 percent of her body and lost part of her arm in a house fire gave Carmack a hug and said, "I'm proud to call you my friend."

"I don't cry easily," Carmack said. "But I had to leave the room."

Staying positive

Kendra Hedgpeth, a 13-year-old from Indianapolis, was a first-grader when she tripped over the cord of a deep fryer, spilling grease over her feet and right thigh.

"For the first two minutes I didn't feel a thing," she said. "Then big bubbles appeared on my skin, and the pain was

unbelievable."

This is her sixth year at the camp - a place where, she said, "I feel like I'm not alone, like I'm any other person."

When Trevor Harkenrider of Fort Wayne was 3 months old, his 3-year-old brother tried to help their mother by giving him a bath.

But he inadvertently put the infant in scalding water.

"Mom heard me scream. She ran upstairs and wrapped me in a blanket," said Harkenrider, now 20. "As she carried me downstairs, my skin was falling off me onto the stairs."

He said people often ask him if he's bitter toward his brother.

"It was an accident," he said. "He didn't know any better. I have no anger toward him at all."

Harkenrider said the camp has helped him embrace his scars rather than hide them.

"My scars are part of me," he said. "If in heaven I see that my scars are gone, I'm going to march right up to God and say, 'Hey, what did you do with my scars?'"



Derrick Britt, left, and Ashley Alvarado play a "bump the cheeks" game while working on a poem about their experiences at a camp in Brown County for burn victims. David Snodgress | Herald-Times