

## The Adult Survivor Family Getaway: “Burn Camp” for the Entire Family

Sandra Hishida didn't know what to expect when she signed up for a family camp for burn survivors. Sandra suffered a burn injury when she was very young, but she persevered and created a life for herself. She grew up and became a nurse, married Kurt, and had two wonderful children, Kasandra and Shoji.

She remembers the first time her family loaded onto a bus with other excited participants and headed to Fresno, California. They passed rolling dry hills spotted with occasional oak, horse and cattle ranches, orchards, and the rocky banks of the snaking King River. When the bus crested the final hill, it took their breath away. They caught their first glimpse of Wonder Valley. The Wonder Valley Ranch, set in a backdrop of blooming oleanders in white, pink and red, features a lake, tennis courts, horse stables and many other areas that invite exploration. In its early days the ranch was a popular weekend spot for the Hollywood jet set. Now every third week in June it is transformed into Camp, a summer camp for burned injured children. On Labor Day weekend it becomes the home of the Adult Burn Survivor Family Getaway.

The three-day retreat for the families of adult burn survivors is sponsored by the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation (AARBF) as a way to help families cope with the challenges of a burn injury. For years the AARBF has sponsored burn camps and other support activities for children who experience a burn injury. In 1994 they decided to add a family retreat for adult burn survivors. Jim Bosch, Associate Director of the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation, explains, “The original concept for the camp came about because we wanted to create a place where children, spouses, loved ones, and partners could interact with others



*The Rodriguez family enjoys a moment together at family camp.*

who were dealing with the same issues of having a burn survivor in the household.” The staff at AARBF were also looking for ways to expand their services for adult burn survivors. The retreat seemed like a good way to allow survivors and their loved ones to create a network of support.

### FAMILY CAMP ACTIVITIES

Family members have an opportunity to work together as a team during the family Olympics and a talent show. They can spend free time together hiking, relaxing and enjoying the scenery. Participants can choose between a number of support



*Kasandra and Shoji Hishida with burn foundation volunteers Naomi and Andrea.*

group meetings for burn survivors, supporters (i.e. the “nonburned” family members), women, men, spouses, and children of survivors.

One of the unique things about the family retreat is that it is bilingual; activities are conducted in both English and Spanish. About 35% of the more than 100 attendees are Spanish-speaking. The Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation arranges to have translators for activities, announcements, and the men’s and women’s support groups.

Participants seem to love meeting other families and the sense of “kinship” they come to feel as a result of sharing experiences. Many people mention that support group meetings are the highlight of the camp. One man commented, “I think the weekend really helped my teenage son. He connected with other kids whose parents are burned.” Another said, “I really enjoyed the support groups, getting to know each other and knowing our experiences and feelings are shared by others.” Others enjoy the chance to bond with family members. One woman remarked, “I loved watching my daughter catch fish and really enjoyed the support groups.” Another said, “I loved the family Olympics and spending time with my family in this fun and supportive atmosphere.”

## THE HISHIDA FAMILY

Even though it had been years since her burn injury, Sandra Hishida feels that the family camp she attended

in 1997 was the first time she was able to talk about being a burn survivor. She found it meaningful to connect with other burn injured adults. “I would never wear sleeveless shirts in public and was extra conscious about certain scars,” Sandra recalls. “The safe environment helped me unveil myself. Seeing more severely burned woman wearing bathing suits inspired me and gave me the courage to try things out.”

Sandra’s husband Kurt feels it has been a great place for the family to go and relax and enjoy themselves. He has seen changes in Sandra since she attended her first family camp. Kurt said he never looked at Sandra as being burned. “I kind of forget about it. Going to camp and being around other burn survivors helped me understand the burns more. I see her as a wonderful person who also happens to be burn injured.”

Both Sandra and Kurt agree that the camp is great for their kids, mainly because they can see that their mom is not the only one who is burned. When they go to camp it makes them more accepting and tolerant of people with differences. “I forgot to warn my kids that there would be other people with scars and disfigurements,” Sandra remembers. “It didn’t even phase them and they were so accepting. It taught me that my children were open-minded about differences in other people.”

Attending the family camp for the past five years has made the Hishida family feel like part of a larger network—a community. Sandra is now one of the co-organizers of the Adult Burn Survivor Family Getaway. “It has brought about a greater understanding for my whole family, it is tons of fun and it’s multicultural feeling brings a special flavor to camp. We just love it!”

The family camp is open to adult burn survivors and their families who are residents of California. The Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation subsidizes the cost so participants pay only \$25 per person. Jim Bosch explains that for those outside the state who want to attend, the camp is open to anyone who can arrange their own transportation to Wonder Valley Ranch. For more information contact the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation at 800-755-2876 or [www.aarbf.org](http://www.aarbf.org).



This story is an excerpt from The Phoenix Society’s *Burn Support News*, Fall Edition 2002, Issue 3. *Burn Support News* is a quarterly publication that contains articles on the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of burn recovery.

The Phoenix Society, Inc. • 1835 R W Berends Dr. SW • Grand Rapids, MI 49519-4955 • 800.888.BURN • [www.phoenix-society.org](http://www.phoenix-society.org)

*This article reprint provided by:*