

Family Burn Camp: YMCA Camp duNord Style

BY MARION DOCTOR, LCSW

It is seven o'clock on a warm Minnesota morning and already the runners and walkers are on the trail. Soon the camp will reverberate with the cheers and squeals of entire families plunging into the cold waters of Burntside Lake for the Polar Bear Swim, an activity guaranteed to invigorate even the sleepest of the sleepy heads. After morning grace and a hearty breakfast, families are set for a day of combined camp activities, individual family outings or time to catch up on rest or leisure often hard to come by in the daily bustle of family life. In this remote north woods setting the cares and demands of everyday life are set aside for one week of uninterrupted family time. For families with a child who has been burned it also provides an opportunity to come together with other families who share this experience.

Family Burn Camp was born out of the realization that burns and other forms of traumatic injury impact not only the patient but also every member of the family. The history of this burn camp program is unique in that it did not originate out of a burn center, a burn foundation or by any person remotely connected with burn care. It came about purely from the concerns of a group of high school students and their mentor who had worked diligently to earn enough money to sponsor a child in their community to attend burn camp in Colorado. They wisely noted that the family of this child was also suffering and issued the challenge, "So what are you doing to provide a similar program to support families?" They not only issued the challenge but they stood ready to create a solution: The Mahtomedi Family Burn Camp.

The uniqueness of this program does not stop here. Because the Mahtomedi High School group had no experience or expertise in organizing or running a family burn camp they called together people whom they perceived could fill that void: YMCA Camp duNord Family Camp staff, staff from Regions Burn Center in St.

Paul, Minnesota, The Children's Hospital Burn Camps Program in Denver, and The Shrine Burn Hospital in Galveston, Texas. This group of consultants not only organized and implemented the family camp program but have continued to pool their resources and work collaboratively for five years.

In contrast to the more traditional burn camp milieu, it was the consensus of the planning committee that the Family Burn Camp would be integrated with the main body of Camp duNord. The rationale for this decision was that this approach could support both the needs for families of burn injured children to come together as a group while simultaneously attending to the more global need for social reintegration. To facilitate the latter, an educational approach similar to a school reentry program was employed. At opening night campfire for the entire camp, the concept of the family burn camp is introduced. The staff and the families participating in burn camp are acknowledged as part of general family introductions. This is followed the next day with a "school reentry program" for separate activity age groups. Children who have been burned and their siblings are integrated into the education process if they feel comfortable doing so. Burn camp staff provide a pre-camp orientation for the regular camp duNord counselors using videos, education and an opportunity to discuss questions and concerns.

This approach has been tremendously successful. Members of the Family Burn Camp report feeling welcome and accepted by all family camp participants. Confirmation of this acceptance is readily observable in camp-wide activities. Families who have attended Camp duNord Family Camp for many years have shared that they feel their lives are enriched by the opportunity to share this week with the Family Burn Camp and have requested that their time in subsequent years coincide with the burn camp program.

The success of the family burn camp concept is reflected each day in smiles and happy laughter, in the active exchange of thoughts and feelings, of shared adventures and exchange of addresses and phone numbers. Jennifer Bullen attended family camp last year with her 8-year-old son, Cole, and her 5-year-old daughter, Jenna. At three years of age Jenna suffered flame burns over 95 percent of her body requiring amputation of her toes, fingers and nose. Jennifer's mission at camp that year was to get help for her family so they could better support Jenna's coping. This year Jennifer returned with her family including her husband Jimmy who was not able to come last year. "I told him that he just had to come. This is just too important for all of us!" Jimmy was an active, involved participant and wholeheartedly concurred with Jennifer's assessment. One of his activities was an overnight campout with his son Cole and two other fathers and their sons. Jimmy shared the fact that time for this kind of outing is difficult with the additional requirements for Jenna's care.

Sarah Mallory the mother of two children, 7-year-old Bethany and 7-year-old Tommy, attended family camp for the first time this year. At 3½ years of age Bethany sustained a 35 percent flame burn injury to her legs, arm, hands, toes, face and scalp resulting in the loss of two fingers, the tip of her nose and part of one ear. Sarah was clear from the onset about her family's need to attend the Family Burn Camp and worked hard to make it happen. She is an assertive young woman and a strong advocate for her children. In a quieter, safer moment perhaps, when asked what was the most beneficial part of camp for her, she tearfully responded, "This is a place where we can live life away from the stares, the questions and rude remarks. Here no one treats us like we are different. We can relax and play." She hopes to attend next year with her husband.

Paul and Rhonda Andres and their four children, Bekah 15, Cole 13, Ethan 10 and Logan 9, have attended Family Burn Camp for four years. Rhonda describes their first year at camp as a time in which they needed to be together as a family to reoperate. Logan's injuries were very recent and they were exhausted. At Camp duNord, parents can use the time scheduled for age group activities to participate with the adult group or to just rest. The Andres' chose to sleep with the knowledge that their children were supervised and engaged in fun activities with other kids of their own age. In the years to follow,

the Andres' have experienced a time of healing and are now using this good spot in their lives to give back to other families. They currently serve as a Resource Family for the entire camp and have been key in fortifying that important bridge between the Family Burn Camp and the main body of campers at Camp duNord. Their vitality, creativity and commitment to others is vital to the success of this program.

"When a child is burned, everyone has to give something up," Paul Andres explains. "Everyone has to sacrifice something. All the children pay for that burn, too. They are required to grow up a bit faster. They have to sacrifice mom and dad time. That is why a camp like this is so important. Here it is not just about the kid that is burned. It is about all of us." The sibling groups give the other kids a safe place to talk about the things that have been hard for them. Parents have an opportunity to come together and share their feelings as well as new ideas for how to deal with the issues facing them.

Paul and Rhonda concur that most of all this week is a time dedicated to their family. "This is clearly the highlight of our year. We cry when we leave and we anticipate it all year. It's right up there next to Christmas."

The mission of Family Burn Camp is three-fold: recreation, family togetherness and an opportunity to exchange information that enriches family life and inter-family relationships. This mission is enhanced by bringing together families facing similar challenges. The opportunity for exchange of information is facilitated through regularly scheduled support groups for parents, siblings, and the child who has been burned, laying the groundwork for private conversations and networking.

The success of the Family Burn Camp at Camp duNord has led to expansion of the concept. A second camp was established at Snow Mountain Ranch, Winter Park, Colorado in October, 2001. Our hats are off to the wisdom of the Mahtomedi High School committee who challenged us and continue to support us in this important endeavor.

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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.

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