

A Lesson Learned

by Sara Pennington

Early Monday morning bright rays of sun light shone through my window forcing me to pull the bed sheets over my head to protect my eyes from the light. My bedroom door suddenly burst open with my Mom stomping in after. "Addie! I told you to be up getting ready by 5:30! it's already 6 o' clock!" my mom shouted furiously. "But Mom, I already told you I don't even want to go! All of this was YOUR idea!" I argued in response. See, my mom signed me up to be a counselor at a summer camp for young children with cancer called "Camp for Courageous Kids". Umm no! why would she even think that I wanted to spend a whole month of my summer at some camp with a bunch of sick kids? "Well we're leaving in an hour whether you like it or not." My mom made her final point as she bounded out of my room. Rolling my eyes I reluctantly dragged myself out of bed, pulled on my bright green counselor t-shirt the camp had given me when my mom signed me up, and then I slipped on some blue jean shorts. In the 10 extra minutes I had to be in the car I braided my long brunette hair down my back. Afterwards I grabbed the overnight bag that I prepared last night out of my room, grabbed a breakfast bar from the kitchen, and made my way to the car where my mother was waiting for me.

It was a short drive from my hometown in Kentucky to the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee. My mom pulled up in front of a small building which was the dinning hall, where all the counselors were to meet once we all arrived at the camp grounds. Before I could jump out of the car my Mom gave me one last thing to think about while I was here. "Remember Addie, I only signed you up because I thought this would be-" "Yeah I know, you thought it would be good for me." As I finished her sentence, I let out a deep sigh. "Please just keep your mind open while you're here." she pleaded. "Sure Mom." I replied, I might as well. I'm already here and there's no sign of turning around and going home now.

When I walked through the doors of the dining hall I saw that only a few other counselors had already arrived. As I continued to walk to the center of the room a tall tan woman with short blonde hair stepped forward to greet me. "Hi Addie! I'm so glad you could join us at camp this year! My name is Jayne, I am the camp leader." "Hi, Jayne, it's nice to be here. I'm really looking forward to meeting all the kids." I lied to her. "Great, the kids will be here in about half an hour. You may go find your cabins and get settled." the rest of the counselors had trickled in in time to hear her give us these instructions. we all turned around and walked out of the dining hall and split up to go find our cabins.

As I was fixing my bed in the corner of my small cabin I couldn't stop thinking about what I had said to Jayne earlier, when I lied about wanting to meet the kids. Even though I have been griping and complaining ever since I found out that I was going to be a counselor here, I'm actually starting to get excited as the time for the kids' arrival is getting closer. The things that my mom had said to me in the car has also been replaying in my head. Maybe if I kept my mind open I could really learn something from them, and maybe I could help make an impact on their lives as well. I'm sure life must be hard as a kid with cancer, having to worry about things that other people your age don't, and not being able to do things that others your age can. I could never imagine the pain these kids could be going through. So maybe, just maybe I can keep my mind open and have a positive attitude.

My arms were getting heavy holding the sign up for my cabin. Only a few of my girls had arrived, Abby (age 10), Haley (age 8), and Maddie (age 12). Looking at all of the girls I noticed that none of them looked their age. They were all small and scrawny. My heart ached for them, wishing life wasn't so unfair. As time was quickly passing kids continued to walk into the room after telling their parents goodbye. By the time all of my kids had arrived I saw that most of the girls were introducing themselves to each other and making friends. But Haley just stood there staring at the ground, seeming depressed and afraid

to look up or talk to anyone. After I called role to make sure everyone was there, I led them all to our cabin. "Okay everyone, make your beds and get settled in. we have to report back to the dining hall for lunch in an hour. If anyone needs help just let me know." I announced. A few minutes later all the girls were finished getting settled and were chattering amongst themselves. Once again I noticed that Haley was sitting alone on her bed afraid to talk to anyone. Immediately I saw this as an opportunity to open up to her. I walked over to her bed and lightly sat down beside her. "Hey Haley, I'm your counselor this summer. My name is Addie." I offered my hand to her as I spoke. "Hi Addie." she replied with a shy smile and gently shook my hand. "Is this your first year at the camp?" I asked. "Yeah, I was diagnosed with stage 3 Leukemia last winter. I've been in remission for about 4 months now but I'm not fully cured. So really all I can do now is think positive and hope my next check up goes well." she answered. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that and I hope the best for you."

I began to look for a place to eat when i saw Haley doing the same thing. I got her attention and invited her to come sit with me and the other girls from our cabin. "I...I don't know." she gained a nervous look in her eye. "C'mon Haley, they're just like you too." I said trying to convince her that there was nothing to worry about. "True. But they seem so care free, like they don't have a thing in the world to worry about. They're used to all of this! But me? I could collapse and be rushed back to the hospital at any minute. I know I said I have to be positive about everything but it's too hard. It's just too much for me to take sometimes. I'm only 8! I wish I could act like I'm a kid! It's not fair!" With a shaky breath she let out all of her worries she has been trying to hide as tears began to stream down her cheeks. Soon a lot of eyes were turned our way. "Listen Haley, everybody here has been in the same spot that you are in right now. That's what I am here for. I think me and you should go outside for lunch today so we can talk about some things."

I took her hand and guided her outside to the picnic tables. “Haley, when you first got here I thought you were just shy.” I didn’t really know how to start out a conversation like this. “No, I’m not shy. I wish I could talk and have fun with all the other girls. But I have other more important things to worry about.” she admitted. “I’m just a kid. Having to deal with all of this cancer stuff everyday isn’t fair. But I can’t do anything to change it. I’m an outsider now, and I always will be. Even in a place full of kids that have the same problems as me. I just can’t be so careless about something as serious as my case.” “Haley I understand where your coming from, and your right, in your case things can be pretty scary. I have no idea what kinda of pain mentally and physically you could be going through. But like you said you are just a kid, you need to let loose every now and then. This camp is made for kids like you. We have doctors and trained counselors here around the clock, we aren’t going to let anything happen to you.” I replied trying to calm her down. “I can’t do that without being worried 24/7. So the way I look at it I won’t be able to relax even if I tried.” she countered. “I know that things may seem that way Haley. But your parents brought you here for that reason. It hurts them to know that you have to be so worried about this at your age. Honestly, I didn’t want to come here in the first place either. I thought it would be scary or depressing being around kids like you. But from you alone I have learned so much. I worry about a lot of things, like getting a bad grade at school. That’s so minor compared to you. You have to worry about school and everything that keeps you safe and healthy. Being in a life or death situation is a lot to handle. I never really realized the stress it could put on somebody so young like you. I feel so guilty for not even wanting to come to be here for you all. When you had to worry about coming here and going out of remission. No one deserves this, especially when it could cut your life so short. Please just promise me you will try your best to let it all go for just a little while. Try to be a kid and have fun. You never know how much time you have left.” She looked at me with a sparkle in her eye. “I promise.” she simply promised me with a confident

smile I never knew was in her. I grabbed her and held her tight and we sat there in each others arms knowing both of us meant every single word we said whole heartedly.