



A Place to Share

Meant to Make a Difference

by Judith Horton

The year was 1951. I was six weeks shy of turning nine. My brother was twelve, and our father had just committed suicide.

Our home life was in shambles – our mother distracted and too exhausted to even grieve after years of coping with an unstable, alcoholic husband.

We lived in a west Texas town small enough for everyone to know our business. The times being what they were, nobody spoke directly to us about what had happened, but everybody knew, and we knew they knew. Deep shame permeated our lives.

About a month after Daddy died, a catalog came in the mail from a girls' camp in the Texas hill country. Soon after, a letter arrived from my grandmother saying that if I wanted to go, she would send me.

I pored over the black-and-white pictures of happy girls paddling canoes and participating in Native American rituals. The cover was cleverly cut out in the shape of an arrowhead, and each day I traced the outline with my fingers. I was not an adventurous child, but I was ready to sign on, and so the arrangements were made.

My mother and aunt fussed over the sewing of endless name tags in the new clothes my grandmother bought me for camp. We borrowed the requisite trunk and packed me up, and my grandmother and a friend undertook to deliver me to the camp.

After a long journey in Grandmother's big humpback car, we arrived at the camp with a rush of cars from all over Texas and Louisiana – parents fretting and hugging, campers flying into one another's arms, counselors and staff herding groups of girls this way and that.

I was terrified and exhilarated. Most of all, I felt I had been handed a new chance at life. Here, nobody knew about my sick, crazy, dead father. Nobody knew the scandals that made up my life. For five-and-one-half glorious weeks, I was free to be any me I wanted to be.

I settled happily and easily into the camp routine. I loved the comfort of the daily schedule – so different from my chaotic home life – and marveled at so many things to learn and do (marveled, too, to discovered that I was good at a lot of them). Camp was wonderful, with real college women as counselors. I was treated with respect and learned the joy of living in a community of shared values.

I made camp friends that lasted for years and attended for five summers in a row. Each summer, camp was the annual highlight of my young life, and the lessons I learned there were invaluable – lessons in trust, sportsmanship, pride of accomplishment, and friendship.

When I was forty-two, my husband and I were graced with a beautiful baby girl, who just happens to have Down's syndrome. We knew we could provide for our daughter's physical needs, but we wanted so much more for her than that.

We wanted a strong community of people who would not just tolerate her, but celebrate her. We wanted a place where she and others like her could grow and learn and build good lives – a place to feel safe and accepted, yet still meet new challenges and experience continued growth. So, we founded Down Home Ranch, and the first major program we began was Ranch Camp, where each year kids and adults with mental disabilities come from

all over for a week or more of the best camp we can give them.

For many of our campers, as for me a half century ago, camp is the highlight of their year. For too many, their lives have been defined by what they *can't* do, and huge amounts of energy have been devoted to compensating. At camp, however, they discover the thrill of accomplishing those things that matter to *them*.

When camp opens each year, and the first returning campers bolt from the car to give me a gigantic bear hug, my heart goes back to the camp of my childhood.

Several years ago I drove out to the camp, expecting to find it smaller and diminished the way most things are that we remember being grand as a child. But it remains as beautiful and grand as ever. And I've learned by experience that beautiful, grand places don't just happen. They are created by people with vision, who have love and respect for what they are doing and for those they serve.

It was no accident that camp made such a difference in my life. It was *meant* to. Perhaps few little girls arrived as forlorn as I, but the staff there accepted me as and where I was and went on to give me summer after summer of growth, learning, and joy.

Let us never accept the idea that what we do is trivial in the grand scheme of things. We touch the lives of children in many ways that have an impact we might never imagine and which may bear fruit in ways we could not dare to dream. □

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