



A Breather from Troubled Lives

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Brewster - This summer, 6-year-old Shayla and her 5-year-old brother Chris are getting the chance to be something they haven't been for a long time - regular kids, laughing, playing, reveling in the joys of childhood.

For two years, the siblings and their mother, Nichelle, bounced between homeless shelters while hiding from their father, with whom Nichelle said she had a stormy, sometimes violent, relationship. The stress of their home life wreaked havoc on Shayla and Chris's psyches, Nichelle said, causing them to develop emotional and behavioral problems.

But for a few weeks this summer, Shayla and Chris have enjoyed a reprieve from all that. The siblings have joined about four dozen youngsters at a summer camp - the first of its kind in New England - that provides children suffering from severe emotional, behavioral and learning problems with the extensive attention and support they need.

On a woodsy slice of land overlooking a pond on Cape Cod, Shayla and Chris have experienced a much-welcome taste of happiness. "All I want, if nothing else gets accomplished, is for my kids to have fun at the camp and to be kids," said Nichelle.

Camp Starfish, which opened June 27, is an expensive and ambitious undertaking designed to provide troubled youngsters not just some summer fun, but the hope that they can overcome their problems. "I think a lot of our kids are on a downward spiral. We're catching them and trying to alter their trajectory," said Deb Berman, the camp's cofounder and executive director. "Our kids have been kicked out of other camps, schools, foster homes."

Inspired by her work at a special needs camp in New York state, Berman wanted to replicate that environment in New England. The positive response proves the need for such a camp, she said. Starfish's two summer sessions, which can accommodate a total of 100 children ages 4 to 15, filled up quickly and some kids had to be turned away, Berman said.

The difference between Camp Starfish and many others is the intense individual attention youngsters receive - the ratio between campers and counselors is 1 to 1. "The majority of them would not be successful in another camp or even in a camp for special needs that doesn't have a 1-to-1 ratio," Berman said. That ratio is one reason why starting Camp Starfish has been challenging - it costs more than \$3,000 per child to run the camp.

But stitching together funds provided by foundations, corporations, and individuals, as well as grants, camp founders were able to provide financial aid to 95 percent of the campers - which is important because many children come from impoverished families.

Some campers also have suffered abuse or neglect, Berman said, and most suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder or other learning disabilities.

Starfish is designed to help campers feel successful through traditional summer camp activities, like swimming, sports, arts and crafts, and team-building exercises, Berman said. The idea is that the 3 1/2-week experience will yield longer-term benefits. "Many of them will develop a concept of self-esteem they've never had before and return to school feeling better about themselves," Berman said.

Andy Epstein, recruitment coordinator at Starfish, said the camp provides a measure of safety to a population of children that often presents a challenge for caretakers. "Some of these kids are just blowing in the wind, waiting for someone to give them attention and love," he said. "You know that it's something that might be new for them and it feels really special."

For some younger campers, Starfish is their first fun trip away from home, their first time playing in the woods or swimming in a lake. "I was excited. I've never been to camp," said Daryl, 8, who has been working on his swimming strokes. Camp officials requested that the last names of campers and their families not be used.

Several teenagers, however, are veterans of other camps that left some unpleasant memories. "Here, they deal with the person instead of telling you to go away," said Steve, 15, who said the last camp he went to was less organized. "Students help students out here. They just got in fights there."

In some cases, Starfish provides a much needed break for parents exhausted by the demands of taking care of their troubled children. Norm and Debbie, of Marblehead, said they haven't had more than a weekend-long vacation since Andrew's birth. Their 14-year-old son suffers from anxiety and bipolar disorder, a type of depression. Starfish was the first place the couple said they felt comfortable leaving Andrew overnight.

"There's very little in terms of camps or schools for children who suffer from depression," Debbie said. "This is the first camp where he could feel part of a community."

The 1-to-1 ratio was a key indicator for Debbie and her husband of Camp Starfish's quality. "It told me instinctively that they knew that there were going to be times when children really needed a lot of support," Debbie said. Andrew's therapist seconded Debbie's trust in the camp after visiting the teen at Starfish.

"She really sang the camp's praises and said that Andrew was just really confident about himself, felt good about himself," Debbie said. "For him to feel confident in himself is really pretty novel. I was just really pleased."