

Stories From The Forest



**My years as a counselor at a
camp for children with special
needs**

By Daniel Roth

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Chapter 1 --- The Beginning

The picture was of 8 smiling boys in Cub Scout uniforms. Some of the boys obviously had Down's Syndrome or other handicaps, but one look at their huge smiles made the pride they felt obvious. The look on their faces as they stood tall in their uniforms was priceless. They were cub scouts, and the uniform was never worn with more pride. I instantly wanted to be part of something that made these boys feel so important.

I had just started my first job as a computer programmer at the York Bank. Because of work I moved the 22 miles to the York Area and I was looking for something constructive to do with my spare time. As I was browsing through the paper, I noticed the picture and a small article. The article explained that the den had recently started and was held at a church in south York. I cut out the article and set it aside. A couple of days later the picture was still sitting on the end table. I crumbled it up and threw it away, or so I thought.

A few weeks went by and while I was cleaning behind the couch I found a crumbled up piece of newspaper. Eight smiling faces were beaming out from the crinkled newsprint. I couldn't put the picture away. I telephoned the number under the picture and set up a meeting that would permanently change the way I look at people and at myself.

We were to meet at the church where the scout meetings were held. I was never very comfortable at interviews and was afraid I would come off bad. With all the bad things in the newspapers how could I convince them of my intentions? Why was I here? I did not have much experience with scouting or dealing with children with handicaps. What qualifications did I really have? The article wasn't asking for help, why should they trust me?

I timidly opened the door marked "Minister's Office" and peeked in. The minister stood up from behind his desk, introduced himself as Pete Seiler and shook my hand. He also introduced me to the two other people in the room, Gary Jones, the scout master, and Virginia Houser, the special needs den leader.

Pete said that he had recently been transferred to the area and was looking for activities for his son, Peter. Since Cub Scout meetings were held at his

church he thought it would be a good idea to start a Cub Scout Den that Peter could join. He looked within his own church for leadership and Virginia volunteered to help.

As they talked it became obvious that they were as nervous as I was. They had run a police report on me and contacted my boss at work. They wanted to believe me but were skeptical of a young man appearing out of nowhere. I tried to present a confident front and answer their questions as positively as possible, but I was never very good at interviews. We all muddled through. After the interview they told me that they would give me try.

That Tuesday I entered the room for my first meeting. I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't expect 7 boys calmly sitting at a table. No one was bouncing off the walls or out of control. My confidence grew. All of the boys were mobile and could speak. None of them would be considered severely handicapped.

Because the den had been active for a few weeks, I looked to the other leaders for guidance. They said I should work with David. David was a short, heavy 8 year old with Down's Syndrome. I prided myself in being "good with children" and confidently approached David. I started talking to David, but got no response. The rest of the boys started working on a craft. I calmly attempted to get David to join the group. Popsicle sticks flew everywhere. I tried my best to get David to cooperate but the more I coaxed the more he resisted. I tried all the things I would normally do to get kids to cooperate. The only response I got was David throwing himself on the floor and kicking the wall. I tried to pick him up back into his chair, but was unsuccessful. I spent the next 50 minutes desperately trying to get David to join in, or at least not hurt himself or anyone else. I never felt more relieved as I did when the parents arrived to take their scout's home.

Afterwards, I felt sick. How could have I done worse? Every scout did what was expected, except for the one I was helping. I was convinced that I was in over my head and they were going to tell me not to come back. At that point I really didn't care, maybe this wasn't for me.

I spent allot of time soul searching that week. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. They didn't really know me. I didn't really know them. If I never went

back we would all just go on with our lives. If I couldn't get one scout to cooperate, what good was I?

Something inside wouldn't let me give up. I went back.

Later I found out that they were having trouble with David and were hoping I would be able to handle him better. I wasn't the miracle worker they were hoping for. We were all learning as we went. We did eventually change our approach toward David and let him join in at his speed, without pressure.

David did get much better but he still had his bouts. At times, sometimes for no apparent reason, he would throw himself on the ground and his entire body would go limp. He would shut himself out from anything you said. We soon learnt that the best way to handle this was to ignore him. He would eventually be lured back into the fun.

David also knew how to use his weight and size to his advantage. One time we were at a Cub Scout Day Camp and David grabbed two scouts from a different troop and held them both against a wall. We never found out why he did this, but its good he got them coming out of the bathroom and not going in.

As we all got to know each other, the mood changed from one of doubt, to one of cautious optimism, and finally to a fun place. We all looked forward to Tuesday nights. The enthusiasm was contagious. Even David was opening up and joining in, at least most of the time. Many great memories were formed that first year.

Once a month all the Cub Scout dens meet for a pack meeting. At each pack meeting one Den is responsible for the opening and the closing. We had a grand scheme of a play about a tooth with a toothache. We made cardboard cutouts for each of the characters, a healthy tooth, a tooth with a toothache, a toothbrush, toothpaste, various vegetables, and the villain, candy. We gave David the starring role. He stood in the middle of the stage holding a cardboard tooth. When we prompted him he cried because his tooth hurt. Virginia read the story and the rest of us tried to direct the scouts on and off the stage. Half the boys didn't want to leave the stage once they were out and the other half wanted to leave as soon as they

could. Our play was closer to the Three Stooges than a Broadway hit, but to us it was a huge success.

The following November we mustered up our courage and decided to take the boys camping at the local Boy Scout camp. The group of leaders, along with some of the parents, packed up our things and headed off into the wilderness. It was at the camp when Pete approached me. He said he wanted to start a camp. If he could get a core group to commit to helping, he would move forward with the plans. We all enthusiastically agreed.

While plans were progressing for the camp we were approached about a new scout joining our den. Matt S. and his mother arrived one night for a "preview". Matt S., who is non-verbal, but not non-vocal, had a major fit. He yelled, kicked, pumped his elbow against his side and bit his hand.

After the meeting Caryn was waiting for us in the hallway. She had a look on her face that expected rejection. Virginia and I exchanged glances that we both knew meant, "We have to try". The whole point of this den was to provide a place for kids who had no other place to go. We did not intend to say 'no' because a boy seemed a little (or maybe alot) more difficult. We not only told Caryn that Matt S. could join our den, but we also encouraged her to sign him up for camp.

Chapter 2

Wesley Forest - Summer 1989

We were gathered on the patio across the bridge from the parking lot. Anytime now the campers would be crossing that bridge and left in our care. We had a mixed bag of backgrounds. We were not professionals at this. But there we stood in our matching lime green camp t-shirts. Each of us wondering what we had gotten ourselves into. It was too late to turn back now; the campers would be here any minute.

A group of counselors had met on Saturday morning to car pool to camp. Virginia and Pete would be the camp "directors" and the rest of us would be counselors. The goal was to provide a one on one camper/counselor ratio. Extremely calm or cooperative campers might be two to one. The first year "our camp" consisted of a Doctor, a Nurse (who happened to be the Doctor's wife), their two little boys, Virginia, Pete, 8 counselors and 10 campers. I was assigned Matt S., our new scout.

The camp, donated by a wealthy member of the Methodist Church, is nestled in the hills of central Pennsylvania. It is a long way from nowhere. It is a beautiful setting. The camp has a lake and many streams and creeks. The creeks are perfect for "stream stomping" or just splashing around. There are many paths going through the woods surrounding the camp. If you were patient you would most surely see wildlife including deer, rabbit, and an occasional beaver.

We were staying at Penn's Creek Lodge, the log buildings that were part of the original property. The Penn's Creek Lodge consists of one main two-story lodge with 5 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and one large living room. Attached to the main lodge is an annex with 2 more bedrooms. There are also three smaller cabins, the largest of which, Lick Run, the Doctor and his family stayed in. The rest of our camp stayed in the main lodge and annex.

There is also a group of cabins around the lake. This allows two camps to occur at the same time. We would split lake and craft time and share the dining hall at meal times. This year a fourth and fifth grade camp was in the lakeside cabins.

Saying I was nervous was a gross understatement. I did not know if I was really up to this. It was one thing showing up on Tuesday nights and helping out for an hour, this was a totally different ball game. When the campers were dropped off today the parents weren't coming back in an hour. For the rest of the week, day and night, they were our responsibility.

One of the first campers to arrive was Bobby. Bobby was an 8-year-old dynamo. He was deaf, and had limited use of his legs, but don't tell him he had any handicaps. Despite his hearing loss he had no trouble communicating. He rolled into the room with a big smile on his face that said "I'm here, gotta love me" and in two minutes we did. Bobby did things his way and for himself. If you're in his way, watch out! But he'd run you over with a smile on his face.

It was past the registration time and Matt S. still wasn't here. In all honesty, Matt S. not showing up seemed like an easy end to my worries. I found myself hoping that they changed their mind.

He did arrive, a little late. After I gave him and his parents a brief tour, his parents left. I timidly followed Matt S. around as he explored his new surroundings. Things were going smooth, but I was still waiting for the outbreak. Matt S. happily rolled through the evening. He enjoyed supper and the singing that followed.

That evening, right after we read the Poky Little Puppy, Matt S. went right to sleep. I went down stairs happy about the easy, even fun, time I had today. I was still on edge though, waiting for the calm to fall apart.

I went back up in a couple minutes to check on Matt S. I quietly tiptoed to our room and peeked in the door. He wasn't in his bed! I rushed into the room and looked under the beds. He wasn't there! I ran into the hallway and checked all the other rooms and the bathrooms. I went down the steps in a panic and scanned the down stairs. No Matt S.! By this time my heart was pounding a million beats a minute. I ran back up the steps and into our room to make sure he wasn't in his bed. He wasn't! I turned around in a panic and saw that my sleeping bag looked a little lumpy. I pulled back the cover. There was Matt S., sound asleep. We switched beds for the rest of camp.

The more I was around Matt the more I discovered about him. There was obviously a lot more inside Matt that was struggling to get out. It was truly amazing that despite this communications barrier he managed to maintain a pleasant and cooperative attitude. He really responded when he knew you recognized the boy trapped by the communications fog. It's really hard to explain Matt. He understood what you said but had trouble communicating back. He could take in and process the input but it was a struggle for him to provide any feedback. A simple grunt or arm motion was usually the most response I would get.

David came along to camp, and we thought we were comfortable enough with him to assign him to Stacy, one of our college-age counselors. Although David did listen pretty well, we could all picture the scene when Stacy described trying to push a reluctant David into the shower. David's impatience and stubbornness also became evident during a cookout. We were cooking hot dogs over the fire, and David cooked his for about 4 seconds, grabbed it off the stick and tried to eat it.

Stacy was not really the outdoors type. When we were going on a hike, somehow she got out in the lead. We heard a scream! We hurried up to her to see what the problem was, expecting the worse. We discovered a very frightened fawn scared her. Stacy now moved to the middle of the pack. We walked a little further and she started screaming again "A baby bat, a baby bat!" We heroically saved her from a moth.

Pete was also a member of the anti-nature club. He wouldn't walk anywhere without his walking stick. He would use it to move the grass and bushes in front of him looking for snakes. Luckily he never found any, or I'm sure we all would have heard the scream.

Sandy E. was a veteran of many Cub Scout and Boy Scout excursions. Her campers were two young ladies, Jenny and Lesha. Jenny was 15 and much taller than Sandy E. When she was excited, she stammered. At night she would lie in bed and yell "M-m-m-m-y B-b-b-b-b-ed" at the top of her lungs. Lesha was 11 going on 25. She was a cute girl with downs syndrome. Being the only male counselor I became the object of their attention. Every time I

glanced their way they would yell "Oh my God, he's looking at us" and hide their heads. Lesha told everyone, except me, that I was her boyfriend.

As the week progressed, Matt S. and I got to know each other. We went from cautious strangers to good friends. Many times Matt S. would become excited and put his arm around my head and pull it in towards him. During song time this was a common occurrence. We would also sing our way to the dining hall, the peppier the tune the faster Matt S. would walk. As Sunday turned into Monday, then rolled into Tuesday I finally started to calm down and enjoy the ride.

One part of Matt's routine remained consistent. Every night, and multiple times during the day, Matt S. wanted me to read the Poky Little Puppy. If I attempted to read another book he would reach over and take it from me. I must have read the book 50 times.

Another part of the day that we all looked forward to was lake time. We would load up in rowboats and paddleboats, move out to the middle of the lake and let the action start. We would take the buckets, stored on the boats to bail water, and throw water on each other. It was a great time. Afterward everyone was tired, wet, and laughing.

On Wednesday night, our last night together at camp, we unknowingly started a tradition. After 4 days of constant activity and broken sleep we all assembled around the campfire. Even the most active camper was tired. Pat, the site manager, brought his banjo down and we had a sing along. By this time the campers and counselors had time to bond. We were one big pile of tired, happy campers. If you would scan the circle of people you would see campers sitting on counselor's laps or with their heads resting on their shoulders. The apprehensions from Sunday were gone. The transformation from strangers to family had occurred.

We couldn't believe it when Thursday rolled around. None of us was ready to go. As it crept toward departure time, I once again found myself wishing Matt S.'s parents would be late. His parents did come, anxious for news. I tried to explain the fun time I had. I tried to convince them that Matt S. not only had a good time but had a great time, and so did I. As I was thinking

about Matt S. leaving, tears filled my eyes. After sharing so much it is very hard to say good-bye.

Later, as I got to know Caryn better, she told me how much my reaction meant to her. She was used to Matt S. being rejected or at most "put up with". It meant a lot to her that we wanted Matt S. there and enjoyed his company. It still brings tears to both our eyes reminiscing about this day.

The counselors all said their tearful good-byes and gathered in the lodge. We all just shared an experience that turned out to be much more than we ever imagined. We went 5 days with hardly any sleep and virtually no time to sit and rest, and we never felt so good. We had grown from total strangers to a tight family group. Camp years would come and go but the family of Wesley Forest 1989 will always be special to each other.

After the campers left we all felt empty. A piece of us was missing. We would stay until tomorrow and clean up. We were too tired to sleep so some of us drove into the local town and got some pizza and soda. After we returned we gathered in the main lodge and reminisced about our week. We laughed, cried and hugged. Finally late into the evening we drug ourselves up to bed.

Just as I fell asleep, I heard a scream coming from Stacy and Karen's room. I wandered out into the hallway, ready to chase the moth out of their room. They both ran out of their room, faces white as sheets. Karen, the braver of the two, stammered "There's a giant bug in there with wings and teeth coming out the front of its mouth, and it attacked me." I bravely entered the room expecting to find a tiny bug. What I discovered sitting on her pillow was the ugliest bug I ever saw. It was about 5 inches long and had 1/2 inch long pincher coming out of its mouth. We later discovered that this bug was a hellgrammite and common to the area. I went and got a shoebox, covered the bug, and let him loose outside.

The next morning we mopped and cleaned the cabins, loaded our stuff in our cars and assembled in the parking lot. No one wanted to be the first one to leave, so we sort of milled around the parking lot. We thought we could extend the feelings, even if just for a little bit longer. I don't remember who left first but we all followed. The camp left when the campers left, all that

was left was empty buildings. Good-bye for now Wesley Forest, we'll be back.

Chapter 3

SHERATON INN - SPRING - 1990

Pete decided he wanted to supplement the week of camp with an early spring weekend retreat. Because he is not an outdoors type he chose the local Sheraton Inn. We stayed in the motel rooms and used their pool and a large general-purpose room. The retreat started Friday night and ended Sunday afternoon.

I had Matt S. again. My 15-year-old brother, Jay, came along. Because Jay was in my room and I enjoyed Bobby so much, I arranged for Jay to be assigned Bobby. Jay was shy around the other counselors and spent most of the time interacting with Bobby. Sunday afternoon I asked Jay a simple question and he spoke back. One of the other counselors looked at us with wide eyes. When I asked what the surprise was, she told me that she had thought Jay was deaf. She had only seen Jay talking to Bobby in pseudo-sign language. She had not heard him speak all weekend.

On Saturday when we were at the pool, my eyes were opened to what these kids, and their parents, must be faced with everyday. We would use the hotel's public pool. There were some other children in the pool, splashing and playing around. We entered limps, wheel chairs, and all. The Mother of the children stood up and hovered over the edge of the pool. She loudly complained about every move our kids made. I wouldn't have been bothered by her concern if our campers were bothering her children or if they were extremely rowdy. The opposite was actually true. Each camper had a counselor directly watching him or her; no one got out of line. She was complaining because, in her eyes, our campers were "different" and didn't belong with her "perfect" children. What right did she have to judge? Later when I really thought about it, my feelings to her turned to pity. Her ignorance of anyone different will block her from some wonderful people.

Chapter 4

THE DEN GROWS

Mostly through word of mouth, the Cub Scout den continued to grow. One of the new boys was Joey. Joey was a constant trickster, always looking for laugh. He'd wheel around in his electric wheel chair asking everyone to open his 'can of worms' or whatever trick he had that night. One night Joey asked me in a serious voice "What do you and Virginia do when we're not here?"

That summer I realized how the boys viewed me. I'm still not sure if I should have been flattered or insulted. We were preparing to go to the Cub Scout camp for the day. Virginia had prior commitments and could not attend. When we arrived, Peter looked around puzzled. I asked him what was wrong. He asked, "Where's Virginia?" I told him that she couldn't make it. "Well, who's the teacher?" Peter asked. In other words Peter wondered who could be in charge. I was just one of the guys.

Chapter 5

WESLEY FOREST - SUMMER 1990

We approached our second year of camp with allot more confidence then the first year. The camp had grown to 15 campers and 10 counselors, and Pete and Virginia were back. I was very excited because I had convinced Virginia and Pete to let me be Bobby's counselor. My younger brother Jay was going to be Peter's counselor and be in my cabin. I was really looking forward to the week. It promised to be lots of fun.

Because of the growth of the camp we now were using the 3 smaller cabins. Because I was to have Bobby, I was in Lick Run, the biggest of the smaller cabins. It was the most wheelchair accessible. Also in this cabin was my brother Jay, his camper Peter, another new counselor Doug and Matt S. Doug was a perfect match for Matt S. because he sang and played the guitar, and Matt S. loved music.

I straightened up the cabin before the parents arrived. In order to avoid any bad impression I put the horror book that Jay was reading in his suitcase. I later returned to the cabin to find Jay laughing. He informed me that Peter, who rode along up a day early, had thrown his book in the lake (actually it was a creek). Peter and Jay had returned to the cabin when Jay noticed that his book was missing. He thought Peter was a likely suspect and asked him where his book was. Peter replied, in his broken English, "I throw book in lake." Despite Jay's pleads and threats, Peter stood by his story. When I reached in Jay's suitcase and showed him the book Peter started laughing hysterically. Peter summed it up when he said, "That was good one." Peter still looks back on this trick with pride.

Many times we wondered whether Jay or Peter was in charge. Peter was constantly telling Jay that he was Robocop and he was under arrest or repeating his favorite phrase "I'm the boss around here!" Jay couldn't turn his head without risking Peter taking off. He never went far he just enjoyed the chase.

As we were waiting on campers to arrive, we received a phone call from Bobby's mother. Bobby's shunt, which drains fluid away from his brain into

his stomach, became infected and had to be replaced. Bobby was in the hospital now and would not be attending camp. Besides being worried about Bobby's health, I was also very disappointed.

We had received a last minute camper and decided to accept him without our traditional pre-camp visit. All we knew about him was his name, J.J., that he was 15 and blind. Stacy was to be his counselor and had gone to the library and obtained books on Braille and dealing with blind people.

When J.J. arrived, we were really surprised. He was chronologically 15, physically 6 and mentally 3. Because I was now camperless. We shifted a doubled up female camper to Stacy and I took J.J.

For the first couple hours he didn't say anything. I let him feel around our cabin and then led him to and from the main lodge a few times. I didn't feel J.J. recognized my voice or cared if I was there. I could not get any interaction to occur between the two of us.

The walk to the dining hall was about 3/4 of a mile. We had a bus that we used to transport campers who were not up for the walk. J.J did not walk long distances. If he gets tired he would just sit down. Sometimes I had to carry him just to get him to go the 50 yards from our cabin to the main lodge. In order to save my back, we took the bus. J.J moved to the back right hand seat and sat down contentedly. He must ride a bus to school because he certainly looked at home.

The first meal did not go well. I could not get J.J. to eat anything; all he would do was drink milk. When he wanted more milk I heard him speak for the first time, he said "More juice please." I chalked up the first meal to nerves and didn't worry about it.

The night was horrible. J.J got up at 3:00 in the morning and starting wandering around the cabin. I didn't want him to get out of the cabin or trip and hurt himself so I jumped down off my bunk and went to get him. When he felt my hand he took me to his bed and pushed me like I should sit, so I did. He then sat beside me, about 30 seconds later he grabbed my hand and pulled me up and made us switch places. This scenario repeated itself for

about 3 hours. I could not get him to lie back down; I could think of no other choice then to play along.

When it got closer to a more reasonable hour of the morning I woke one of the other counselors, took a quick shower and then got J.J. dressed and ready. He was sitting in the middle of the floor moving his head back and forth to a beat somewhere in his head.

I said, "Come on J.J. let's go ride the bus." I did not really expecting a response. But J.J. surprised me by quickly getting up and saying "Ride the bus, Ride the bus."

When we got to the bus, J.J. headed for the same seat in the back he sat in yesterday. Peter was there. J.J. got mad and started pushing Peter out of the way. I calmly explained to Peter that J.J. needed to sit there. After J.J. got his seat, he contentedly smiled and rocked his head back and forth repeating "Ride the Bus. Ride the Bus".

Breakfast wasn't any better than dinner the night before. Once again, all J.J. would do was drink milk. I was starting to worry. How long could someone last on just milk? How do we make him eat?

The rest of the morning went fairly well. J.J. particularly enjoyed the singing. He would sit there and rock his head to the beat. At various times during the morning, J.J. would appear to be overwhelmed by the crowd. We would have to leave and go for a walk.

By the time lunch was drawing near, J.J. must have been getting hungry. In his singsong voice he said "Oatmeal" and "Ice Cream." I quickly drove to the local store and purchased oatmeal and ice cream. For dinner J.J. ate 2 bowls of oatmeal topped off with a chocolate milkshake. With some more experimentation over the next couple days I discovered that J.J. would eat almost any food that was soft. A huge worry was gone.

After lunch we had lake time. We all put on our life vests and headed out in our boats. It didn't take long for the wild water battle to start. Jay and Peter were in a paddleboat. They were both laughing so hard, trying to get everyone else wet, that we wondered which one would fall out of their boat first. On another boat was Lesha and the nurse, Gretchen. Much to

Grethchen's embarrassment, Lesha spent the whole time yelling, "Help! The witch has me!"

Don and Sandy W., a husband and wife who volunteered as counselors, also talked friends into letting their daughter, Emily, attend camp. Emily is a pretty girl and in allot of ways she reminded me of Matt S. She appeared to understand what was said to her but had trouble communicating back to you. She could talk, but not carry on a conversation. We all found out she knew Don and Sandy W., because at any time she would start repeating "Don and Sandy" over and over. If something really bothered her she would speak. She didn't like when we went to the craft room and would repeat "No crafts, No crafts." Although Emily's communication was limited, it was obvious, at times, that she understood what was going on. When things were explained to her she would do what was asked, but it was hard to tell exactly how much she understood.

I wasn't content just to baby-sit J.J., so I decided to try to get some kind of interaction going. I assembled objects with all different textures. He laid claim to a foam paintbrush and carried it around. If he ever misplaced it he would ask for it by saying, "Toys please."

When we were walking from place to place, although he couldn't see, I tried to get him to appreciate the nature around him. Often we would stop and pick up pieces of bark or rocks. He became particularly fond of a cluster of three medium size trees. The trees were close enough together that he could touch one without letting go of the other. He would sometimes spend large amounts of time going between the trees feeling the bark.

That afternoon I temporarily left J.J. with another counselor. I came back in the room and said something. J.J. immediately reacted. He got off the couch, followed my voice, grabbed my hand and led me to a seat back beside him. After this incident, if I ever wanted to leave him with someone else, I had to sneak away then sneak back before he noticed.

Monday and Tuesday night we "played" musical chairs again. Just when I thought the frustration of our limited communication or the lack of sleep was getting to me, J.J. would pick me up. He would crawl onto my lap and hug me or laugh a happy contented laugh. It was the kind of pure joy that I

don't think the rest of us can feel anymore. During quiet time J.J. would sing back the songs he heard during the day. He wouldn't sing with the rest of the campers, but later back in the cabin we would hear the songs he enjoyed sung back to us.

I was shocked awake Thursday morning by something I hadn't heard all week, my alarm clock. J.J. had slept the whole night! I couldn't believe it. We packed up J.J.'s stuff and prepared for departure. Although at times J.J. was difficult, more mentally than physically, he made me slow down a little. He uplifted me with his laughter and, as I searched for things for him to experience, taught me to appreciate my sense of touch and hearing. It was hard to tell if J.J. grew from the experience, I would like to think he did. I know I did.

CHAPTER 6

SPLITTING DENS

Virginia received a call about a new boy, Mike C., joining scouts. He has cerebral palsy and required total care. He cannot talk or walk, has limited control over any muscles and needed to be fed and cared for. He says 'yes' by raising his left hand and 'no' by raising his right hand, sometimes he has trouble even doing this. He was small and extremely thin. You could wrap your thumb and index finger around his biceps and his legs weren't much bigger.

Mike C.'s mother stayed for the meetings and she was always the one to help him. Because we never dealt with someone with Mike C.'s condition we were content, for now, to observe her interacting with him.

We soon realized there was a lot more to Mike C. than we first imagined. He understands everything you say. His eyes are his communication board; just by looking into them you can tell when he's happy, sad, or mischievous. His smile is completely infectious. When he smiled at you, you couldn't help but smile back.

One day Mike C. was in church with his family. While the people were filing up the middle aisle for communion, Mike C. would glance over at his parents to make sure no one was looking. Then move his hand to hit whoever was beside him in the aisle. Afterward he would glance back, and after making sure he got away with it, he smiled and looked for the next victim.

We knew Mike C. understood what was going on. In order for him to get his Bobcat badge, we had to come up with a way for him to prove he knew the Cub Scout promise. Virginia came up with the perfect idea. She would say the promise for him but sneak in incorrect words. When she made a mistake Mike C. would raise his hand. He got really good at it and was soon picking up even the smallest changes.

The Cub Scout Den steadily grew. We tried to avoid the inevitable but we finally realized we had to split the Den in two. Virginia and I both had apprehensions about the move. I believe we are a good team. She was the

organizer and I was the kid person. She made sure everything was organized and ready and I helped when new kids joined or a scout needed an extra push. But split we did. She took the older boys and I took the younger ones. My brother Jay volunteered to help me.

As part of the split we contacted the local school district to see if there was any interest in their special needs classes. We got a fair response, and the new dens began. I struggled with the organizational side but our meetings are always fun.

One of the new scouts was Mark. Mark was an 8-year-old bundle of energy. One of his favorite sayings was "Come on dude, let's go." If he sat for more than 5 minutes, he was doing well. After Mark started we had to keep the door to our room closed. This gave us a couple extra seconds to catch him if he headed for the door.

One night our guard was down. We turned around and Mark was gone. Jay took off after him. He tracked him down in the bathroom, locked in a stall. Jay convinced Mark to open the door. Jay soon discovered Mark had taken his shirt off and dropped it in the toilet. Jay picked up the shirt and carried it, dripping, to the sink. He turned his back to wring out the shirt and Mark was gone again. Jay tried to grab him but slipped in the water on the floor. Mark ran up the steps and into the sanctuary where the choir was practicing. Imagine their surprise to see a little ball of lightning run by, without a shirt, then a couple seconds later Jay running through after him. I hope they have a sense of humor.

Another time we took the Scouts bowling. Mark came along and when it was his turn to bowl he carefully rolled the ball down the lane, then took off after it. He ran down to the end of the alley, got down on all fours and peered in to see where the ball went. I carefully chased after him, picked him up, and carried him back. One of the bowling alley employees met us at the end and said "You know, you're not supposed to go down there."

CHAPTER 7

Camp Hebron - Spring 1991

This year we threatened a boycott, and forced Pete to give up the Sheraton. We chose Camp Hebron for our retreat site. Camp Hebron is located in the hills of south central PA. We would be staying in a circle of cabins. Each cabin contained 8 - 10 beds and a bathroom.

Mike C. signed up to go to camp, and I nervously agreed to be his counselor. I had never fed or dressed him. More than that I was worried something would be wrong and I wouldn't be able to figure out what it was.

When Mike C. first arrived, I tried my best to act confident for his Mother. When it came to Michael she was not quick to give her trust. She must have bought my act, because she left him with me.

My first order of business was to get Mike C. in a good mood. I pulled out all of my best jokes and ridiculous actions. He laughed so hard he could hardly breathe. We joked and kidded our way through the evening. He made it easy by laughing at everything I did no matter how ridiculous. I felt he was working to put me at ease instead of the other way around.

The first time I tried to get Mike C. dressed was quite an experience. Mike C.'s joints, especially his elbows and knees, are extremely stiff. They can be moved but only slowly and carefully. I was certain I was going to hurt him. The first step was to get his shirt off. Mike C. cannot sit up on his own or hold his hands up for an extended period of time. You can probably imagine the scene as I attempted to hold his body up, his arms up, and pull the shirt off over his head all at the same time. Because I was afraid to bend his elbows I tried to accomplish this without bending his arms. I managed to get the shirt halfway off, with his head still covered. I was certain Mike C. was thinking, "What is this clown doing?" 10 minutes later the shirt made it up over his head. I expected Mike C. to be upset but he had a huge smile on his face, he thought it was loads of fun to see me struggling. Once again I was working to keep Mike C. at ease and it was him who showed patience and a sense of humor that put me at ease.

From then on Mike C. found great humor in any troubles I would have. Mike C. especially found my inexperienced wheelchair driving amusing. Anytime I would bump into a door or have trouble getting over stones he would laugh.

The most frustrating part of dealing with Mike C. was the communication. It is scary to think that he might have some, otherwise, minor problem but his lack of communication prohibits him from telling you. When he was upset, it was up to me to figure out what was wrong. I always started with the most obvious, hunger and thirst. It could be an itch, or a stomachache or the need to be put in a different position in his wheel chair or bed. Luckily Mike C. was almost always in good spirits and enjoyed the "guessing game". I tried to be "super aware" of any changes in mood or facial expressions and to react immediately, we were having a great time and I didn't want to lose him.

Did I mention that Camp Hebron is located in the Mountains of Central PA? The cabins were located halfway up a very steep hill. To go either direction involved pushing a wheel chair up or down a hill. The first two or three times it didn't bother me, but it soon became torture.

Camp Hebron had horses. A chance to go horseback riding was the highlight of most of the camper's weekend. Every camper got a chance. The camper's who could not sit independently, had a counselor walking along on either side. To me, the most unforgettable part was the smiles. They were actually riding a horse!

One of my goals is to talk to each of the campers every day. It has always been a policy of our camp to take any campers that would have trouble adapting to another camp. This means when you approach a new camper you are never sure what kind of response you will receive. We have had children who are deaf, blind, mute, and all different levels of physical, mental, and emotional handicaps. But no matter what challenges each camper has brought we have always adapted enough to make it a week of growth for everyone.

This year I noticed a new camper sitting with the group, but not interacting. I walked up and said "Hi, I'm Dan, what's your name?". She didn't answer but proudly showed me her name tag. I responded "Hi Trisha, I'm glad you're here!"

Well, I must have been the first one to talk to her because from that moment on whenever Trisha saw me she was right by my side. She ate with us, went on hikes with us, and when we sat down for a rest she was always right there.

Trisha was a cute little girl who happens to have Cerebral Palsy. She could walk, with a severe limp, and she could not talk. She had trouble with her muscle control and sometimes ate sloppily. But she could communicate with her smile and her attitude. Every time you saw her there was a huge smile on her face. She was determined not to let the cerebral palsy hold her back. On the first day of camp I saw Trisha struggle to bend over and pick up a yellow dandelion flower. My initial reaction was, we are in the woods, it's spring, there are all kinds of beautiful wild flowers blooming. Why would she want a dandelion? She took the yellow weed and put it in her coat pocket.

After the weekend was over and parents were coming to pick the children up, I saw Trisha crying. I walked over to her; I was going to tell her that we would see her next year. But what she did when I approached her was more powerful than any words I could have used. She reached into her pocket, removed her prized, and by now slightly mutilated, dandelion, and gave it to me. Even if I had wanted to I could not have responded, I was choked up with tears. I took the dandelion stuck it in my shirt pocket with the flower sticking out. To me it was more beautiful than any rose or carnation could have been.

Why do I love dandelions? Because they remind me of Trisha and of all the other dandelions of the world. We all know them, and at times we have probably been one. They are the people who, when you see them, it is easy to turn your head and walk away. They are used to being ignored, and don't expect attention. They are the handicapped, the old, the unpopular, the hurting. It's easy to be nice to the popular, beautiful people. Everyone wants to wear a rose in their lapel. Everyone wants to be part of the "in" crowd. But Jesus didn't hang out with the roses and carnations; he hung out with the dandelions.

Let's see if today we can put dandelions in our lapels.

Mike C.'s mother arrived early Sunday. She passed me as I was pushing Mike C. up the hill for the last time. My aching muscles were glad to see her, but my heart wasn't quite ready to let Mike C. go yet.

I will never forget my first weekend with Michael. Here he was, stuck in a body that barely worked. What did he have to give? He gave what he had: his smile and his attitude. He gave them with all he had. He took the cards life dealt him and played them for all they were worth. Michael not only tried to make the best of life, but he also made the people around him happier. Can we say the same?

Chapter 8

Wesley Forest Summer - 1991

This year I was in one of the smaller cabins. Jay and Don were the other counselors in my cabin. My camper was Mike C. Jay's campers were Michael P. and Kevin. Don had J.J., my camper from a year before.

Michael P. was a very cute and funny boy with down's syndrome. Mike P. was our entertainment, constantly picking us up with his humor and honesty. One night we were getting ready for bed and a bug flew in our cabin. I took a rolled up newspaper and swatted the bug.

Mike P. looked at me and said, "Why did you do that?"

"I didn't want him bothering us." I answered.

With a straight face and complete honesty he answered "But there's enough room."

You're right Mike. There is always enough room, for all of us.

Kevin's mother accurately described him on his health from when she said he was chronologically age 12, and mentally age 25. Kevin was very street-wise and had a very quick wit. Kevin's muscles were not developed and he moved around in an electric wheelchair. He had enough arm movement to feed himself but needed help dressing or getting in and out of his wheelchair. He also craved his independence. If he could do it on his own, he wanted to. Kevin was the only African American camper, but that didn't bother him. One day when Jay was helping him in the shower he looked at all the soap lather and started yelling "Help I'm turning white!"

I moved through the week on pure adrenaline. I hardly slept, waking at every noise, expecting the worst. When he was awake, I was constantly trying to keep Mike C. laughing. I must have asked him if he needed a drink or adjusted in his chair 50 times a day.

Mike C. especially enjoyed lake time. He would wear a headpiece that stopped his head from going under water, but permitted him to kick himself

around. He really enjoyed the freedom of the water. It was the only place he did not need any help to move around.

Mike C. had the wheelchair equivalent of a LandRover. It had four heavily treaded wheels each with it's own shock absorber. One day I decided to try it on the path through the woods to the dining hall. It really rolled. I started jogging and the wheelchair was bouncing all over the place. Mike C. was laughing so hard he was gasping for air. I jokingly asked him if this was more fun than Disney World. His left hand flew up in the air. I took that for a very emphatic:"Yes".

Bobby also signed up for camp this year. Luckily he made it. During one of our daily water battles on the lake Bobby and his counselor, Becky, were involved in a particularly heated war. Bobby was sliding all over his paddleboat, but he refused to stop throwing water to worry about something as trivial as holding on. Bobby started slipping out of the boat. Becky caught him as he became partially submerged.

Mark, from scouts, also signed up for camp. Mark was assigned to Julie, a high school aged counselor. I'm sure she had no idea what she was in for. She spent the week chasing after Mark as he hunted vampires. He is always on an adventure; this summer every dark corner held a vampire and anyone whose teeth were the least bit pointed was certainly a vampire.

Mark loves straws, pencils and Popsicle sticks. Mix them with his imagination and the combinations are endless. They can be anything from scissors to razors to guns. Mark gave many free haircuts and shaves with his "barber tools".

One of the counselors, Terry, happens to have gray hair. So every time Mark walked by Terry he'd say "Hi Grandpa!" Of course, in order to get to Terry, we encourage Mark to call him that whenever we could. If Mark found something that he did make other people laugh, he would do it over and over.

When Thursday, departure day, arrived Mike C.'s Mother was the first to arrive. She went up to Mike C. and he looked the other way. He wasn't ready to leave. She said that she was glad that he had fun but she wished he would

have missed her a little bit. Then he gave her a big smile. He did miss her but he wanted to finish the day with the rest of the kids. She sat back and watched.

The day did end and Mike C. and his mother left. No matter how long or hard the week at camp is, every year the hardest part is saying good-bye.

Chapter 9

WESLEY FOREST - SUMMER 1992

One big change this year, Pete decided he needed time to pursue furthering his Pastoral degrees and that he would not attend camp. Don would take his place. Don spends lots of time preparing the worship time for the campers. Worship time is never just someone talking there is always plenty of prompts, camper interaction and humor. When you're dealing with the range of handicaps found at our camp keeping all of them interested is no small accomplishment.

This year we were back in Lick Run. I was Mike C.'s counselor again. The other counselors in our cabin were Jay, Dave B., and two brothers Chris and Andy. Jay was Mark's counselor. Dave B., a physical therapist, had Mike U., another boy with total-care cerebral palsy. Chris, who was in high school, had Peter and Dave G., a new boy Peter's age. Andy, who was too young to be a counselor, came along to help.

One day we had just finished making sun visors in crafts and Jody, one of our new campers, was showing me her craft. It was a simple, happy picture of two people, with a rainbow and the sun shining. I told her it was very pretty. She informed me that one of the smiling people was me. "Thanks that's very nice" I answered. Then she said "Now I can scratch your face off" and took her fingernail and scratched the face off one of the people in the picture.

Because we had gotten to know each other last year, and more importantly, because of his good nature and sense of humor, Mike C. had become easier for me. With the nervousness from the year before gone we really enjoyed ourselves. We laughed and joked our way through the week.

David, from scouts, really helped me out this week. Every mealtime David would be waiting to push the wheel chair to and from the dining hall. David was a big help considering all the walking we did this week. Sometimes I was tired just after getting Mike C. up and dressed.

Chapter 10

CAMP SPLIT - Fall 1992

It soon became obvious that our camp was bursting at the seams. We knew we had to do something, so we split the camp by age group. Don, Virginia and some of the counselors agreed to support both camps.

I agreed to attend the first fall weekend retreat for the older (over 15) campers. I was assigned Brian. Brian was a bundle of energy. It was hard for Brian to sit for 2 minutes, but when something interested him he could soak it in. You could name any city and he could tell you the sports teams, and the name of the stadium. We all tried to stump him, but none of us succeeded.

Glen was also in our cabin. He and Brian were like ice and fire -- complete opposites. Brian was always moving and talking and Glen hated too much activity. Glen quickly developed an attitude towards Brian. Anytime Brian would talk to him Glen would get mad and yell at him. Glen's favorite phrase seemed to be "I don't want to!"

Brian soon started mimicking Glen, and this just made Glen angrier. We tried our best to keep them apart, but staying in the same cabin it was difficult.

The World Series happened to be going on at the same time as our camp and Brian, being a big sports fan, was interested. One night after all the other campers were asleep we sneaked out into my car and listened to the game. Brian thought this was a grand adventure and couldn't wait to tell everyone.

Brian also had a crush on counselor Stacy. One night Brian wanted to impress her and dumped a load of my after shave on then attempted to gargle with my Listerine. We heard a loud scream and found Brian trying desperately to wash the taste out of his mouth.

I explained to Brian that Stacy was engaged, but he was relentless. After camp I called and was talking to Brian. He asked if I saw Stacy and I told him I was going to her wedding that weekend. Brian, never one to give up, told me to tell her that it was O.K. if she changed her mind, he would be waiting.

Because we had extra room we agreed to take Terry, an older camper, from Don's church. Terry is in his fifties, has cerebral palsy, and limited mobility. He could get himself around in his wheelchair, as long as the surface was flat and the distance not too far. He could feed himself but required some assistance getting dressed. The most remarkable thing about Terry was his attitude. He never complained, to him the world, and everything in it, was beautiful. He was always in a good mood and kind to everyone. No matter what you suggested it was O.K. with him. Any little thing you did for him he made sure to thank you. When Terry thanked you, you knew he meant it. We should all be more like Terry.

Chapter 11

WESLEY FOREST - Summer 1993

This year I was back in the main lodge. Jay now had Mike C. and was staying in Lick Run. I had Peter and Matt G. We shared our room with Jim, a new counselor, and Mike P.

Having Peter and Matt G. was a new experience for me; it was the first time I had a camper that could talk, also the first time I had a camper who would wander away.

It was really hard for me to back away from Mike C. I felt responsible for him. Every time he was slipping in his wheel chair or made a little noise I wanted to run over and help him. But I knew that it was better for Jay and Mike if I left Jay make the same mistakes and learn the same lessons I did. It was very hard but I only gave Jay advice when he asked for it, and he didn't ask often. He and Mike C. really bonded. In a way I was jealous. At camp Mike was no longer "mine", but I also realized it was better for everyone, especially Mike, that he be exposed to different people.

One of the most amusing new campers was Nicholas. You never knew what he was going to say. Before worship time we would all gather in a circle and Don would ask if anyone had anyone or anything they wanted to pray for. We went around the circle and heard many prayer requests for parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Then Nicholas raised his hand and said in his most solemn voice "My cat got run over by a car and I'd like to praise the Lord for that".

Another new camper was Stephen. Stephen was one of our older campers; he had Down's Syndrome and was very quiet. One day we were in the craft room getting ready for snack time. Eileen, Stephen's counselor, told him to go in the bathroom and wash his hands. A little while later, when Stephen didn't return, Eileen went to find him. The bathroom door was open so Eileen peeked in. No Stephen. She went outside and didn't see him. She came back in and told us she didn't know where Stephen was. A small search party checked the immediate area. No Luck. Now we were all growing uneasy. We assembled all the campers in the craft room and left them under

the supervision of a few counselors. The rest of us took off in every direction. I ran up along the creek. I returned empty handed to find Stephen in the craft room with the rest of the kids. The whole time he was standing behind the bathroom door, ignoring our calls.

Another new addition to our camp was the "Wesley Greyhound". Someone had donated a handicapped accessible bus to the camp, and another group of campers painted it. It was painted with trees, the sun and mountains. On the front hood were flames and the words "NO BRAKES" painted backwards so any cars could see it in their rear view mirror. Now we didn't have to worry about finding a van to use and transporting it to camp.

One of the new campers was Darcy, a cute young lady, who told us all that she was going to be a high fashion model. Darcy's caring personality and cute smile endeared her to everyone, especially Nicholas. Nicholas followed her everywhere. One day they were sitting on the porch and he said to her "I wish we were the only ones on the porch, it would be just like something that rhymes with bonance".

Timmy was a new camper around 12 years old. He was in an automobile accident, and would gladly show you the scars. Timmy tried to act tough but really wanted your attention and praise. A little praise or thank-you swelled Timmy with pride. Timmy and I developed a secret handshake, it involved a series of handshakes ending with using your fingers to mimic shooting a gun, blowing away the smoke and putting the gun in a holster. Every time Timmy passed me we would do our handshake. Timmy's favorite phrases were "nothing can stop this man" and "piece of cake".

One night a year we have the opportunity to sleep in teepees. The teepees look just like Indian teepees. They have a dirt floor and an open flap top. It is up to each camper/counselor to determine if they are to "rough it". This year Matt G. wanted to go but Peter didn't. I traded campers for the night, Peter stayed at the lodge and I took Nicholas with me. As I was leaving I had to assure Peter over and over that I was coming back in the morning. When we left he didn't seem convinced. We loaded up the van with sleeping bags, pillows and stuffed animals.

After a restless night sleeping in the dirt, we headed back to the lodge. When we got off the bus I heard "Counselor, counselor" and then Peter jumped into my arms. He was shocked that we actually returned unharmed.

Chapter 12

Wesley Forest -- Spring 1994

This weekend I learnt another lesson in underestimation. My camper was Mike U. Mike U. had come to camp a few times before, and he was even in my cabin some of those times. Without close observation, Mike U. didn't seem to grasp a lot of what was going on. He had Cerebral Palsy and required total care. He was always pleasant, and a lot of times I would hear him laugh, but I never paid much attention to what was making him laugh.

I quickly learnt that Mike U. was almost always paying attention to everything that was going on, and would laugh at any funny thing happening anywhere in the room. Shortly after he arrived. I unhooked him from his wheelchair and went to lift him out. I tried to pick him up but he didn't seem to budge. I looked for a buckle or strap that I missed but couldn't find any. Mike U. was just heavier than I thought. When I did finally pick him up I said "Mike you're heavier than a bag of bricks." Mike U. responded with loud laughter. From then on I observed Mike's reactions more closely.

Mike U. always seemed content; he never appeared to react negatively. Sometimes this let you take Mike for granted. But being Mike's counselor opened my eyes up to how much he does understand and grasp. Anything, even mildly humorous, seemed to make him laugh. As I got to know Mike's sense of humor, it became quite enjoyable trying to make him laugh. Once again I learnt a valuable lesson from my camper.

Chapter 13

Wesley Forest -- Summer 1994

My camper this year was Kyle, He was 8 years old, very cute (blonde hair and big blue eyes) and had Spina Bifida. He could walk with a walker for short distances but for the most part was dependent upon his wheel chair. When we were around other people he was sweet, shy and very careful not to let me out of his sight. He soon became a camp favorite.

Although he was by no means overly difficult, when we were alone he could be bossy, stubborn and demanding. Whenever I tried to make him do something, like get dressed in the morning, he would tell me "I don't love you anymore" or "bad counselor". But even when he said these things, he said them in a soft voice that was very hard to get mad at. He could tell when you were really on the verge of getting mad, and would give in.

One evening we were sitting at a picnic table. I got up to get Kyle a drink from the jug on another table. I only got a couple steps when I heard "COUNSELOR". It was the loudest voice Kyle used all week, but was really not much more than a loud whisper. I quickly turned around. The problem was one of the other counselors had sat down beside Kyle and started talking to him. Kyle ignored them until I got back. He made me sit between him and the other counselor, and then he would talk to them.

One morning we were running a little late for breakfast and I was helping Kyle get dressed when he said "NO! Barney". I asked him what he wanted and he said he wanted to wear his Barney underwear. I tried to explain that all the Barney underwear was dirty.

"Bad Counselor" was his reply.

"Come on Kyle, we have to get ready, can't you wear Bugs Bunny Instead" I pleaded.

"I don't love you anymore" Kyle countered.

"O.K. Kyle, if you put Bugs Bunny on I'll get some Barney washed for later"

What a relief a major situation defused.

Timmy, a camper from last year, was also in our cabin. Kyle quickly picked Timmy as his "big brother". Timmy loved the attention. He told Kyle he was a fireman and saved hundreds of lives. Kyle took it all in and looked at Timmy with great admiration. Timmy would often ask what he could do to help with Kyle. If Timmy was there Kyle wouldn't care if I had to leave the room for a second. We dubbed ourselves the Three Musketeers.

Timmy entertained Kyle by pretending he was banging his head against the wall and then kicking the wall to make a noise. Kevin G., who was also in our cabin and was the second member of the Timmy fan club, tried to imitate Timmy's trick. He forgot one part - he really banged his head.

When it came time to decide if we wanted to sleep in the teepees Jeremy, a new counselor, tried to ask Bobby, in sign language, if he wanted to sleep in the teepee. Bobby misunderstood him and thought he was asking him to sleep in the toilet. To make the sign for toilet, you make the sign for the letter T then shake your hand back and forth. Bobby got a look on his face that let Jeremy know in no uncertain terms that he thought he was missing a few marbles and motioned for him to go away. Needless to say, Bobby slept in his bed that night.

One evening after worship Matt, the counselor, was picked to receive "100 gifts". What this meant was each camper threw whipped cream, dumped breadcrumbs, and threw water balloons at him. When it was Kyle's turn he was a little cautious about it. After we were finished and Matt was standing there, a sticky mess, Kyle looked up at me and in a very concerned voice asked if Matt was mad.

This year for "lake time" we gave the campers a choice of swimming, boating, or playing in the creek. Most of the action seemed to center on the creek. There would constantly be water battles. Kyle would want to join in, so I would carry him out to the middle of the action and sit down in the creek. He would take a cup fill it with water, pull his arm back to throw the water, then accidentally dump it on me. He did this over and over not realizing most of the water was ending up on me.

Once again, we found ourselves facing the toughest part of the week, saying good-bye. We went down to the dining hall for our last meal together this

year. We share the dining hall with a fourth and fifth grade camp. After the meal they all stood up and sang the Amy Grant song "Hey Now" as they walked around the room hugging our campers. Because these kids were at such an awkward age when they, especially the boys, are usually hesitant about showing their feelings the moment was particularly touching. Once in a while we find ourselves in a place and time when everything in the world seems right and good, this was one of those moments. No one walked out with dry eyes.

Kyle's parents were a little late. I was sitting out on the porch with Kyle and counselor Matt. Out of nowhere Kyle looked up at me with those big blue eyes, wrapped his arms around me and said, "I love you". I looked over at Matt and saw him wipe the tears from his eyes, get up and walk away. Later he told me that if he had stayed he would have started crying.

Chapter 14

Wesley Forest -- Spring 1995

This Spring I was back in "Lick Run". I shared a cabin with my brother Jay and Dave. Dave had recently moved to Wisconsin from PA but still manages to come back for camp. I had Bobby, Jay had Mike U. and Dave had Mike C.

We also had two new counselors from Germany, Cyra and Katrin. Their English was pretty good but they had trouble with some words. One time Cyra was sitting by Michael P. during worship. Cyra was talking to me.

Mike P. said "Hush".

Cyra looked at me and asked, "What is he trying to tell me."

"He is telling us to be quiet." I answered.

Cyra then looked at Mike P. and told him "Next time say something simple like Shut-up."

Another time Cyra was watching Peter be his usual energetic self. She mentioned that he had a lot of patience. She could tell from my puzzled expression that I didn't understand her use of adjectives.

"Am I using the right word?" She asked.

"What are you trying to say?" I inquired

"He has a lot of energy in everything he does."

"I think you mean passion, patience means calmly waiting" I tried to explain.

Cyra and Katrin must have studied a handbook of American slang because they would both use phrases that must have come from a guide to speaking American, probably written by a German. Whenever Cyra would get confused she would say, "Beam me up Scotty".

This year the nurse brought her two daughters with her, Erin was 3 and Jessica was 7. One day we were all rolling a ball back and forth in a large circle. After we were playing for a while little Erin walked over and moved

my nametag around to my back. She told me that I had to wear it on the back because nobody rolled me the ball and I was a loser. Allot of people found it quite amusing that anytime Erin saw me, with my name tag on properly, she would tell me "I told you to wear your name tag in the back because you're a loser!"

Melody was with us again, and most times, we would walk to the dining hall together. She came with a magazine photograph of Richard Simmons, that she carried everywhere. He was her hero. Anytime she would make a craft or color a picture she said she was going to send it to Richard Simmons. It seemed appropriate that Melody liked Richard Simmons, they both shared a common positive approach to life. Melody was always quick to give encouragement to someone else. I never heard her be negative or down. If you look for the bad side of someone or something you were sure to find it but if you look for the good side you'll find that to. Melody always looks for the good side. We should all try to be a little more like Melody. I think Richard would be proud of the comparison.

Early in the weekend Melody picked up an orange from the dining hall. She didn't eat it, she just carried it around. We would play a game with it when we were walking to or from meals. One of us would throw it in the air and catch it as we counted backwards from 10. When we got to one we would toss it to the other person. As you can imagine there were quite a few times when the orange fell to the road and by Sunday afternoon it was quite soft and mushy. When Melody's mom arrived she told her she had a surprise for her, then she reached in her pocket and pulled out the battered orange.

Our cabin had a loft that could only be reached by sharply angled steps, almost like a ladder with slightly wider rungs. Because of the campers staying in our cabin we didn't think we would be using the loft. I should have known better then to underestimate Bobby. When he got it in his mind that he could sleep up there he went over to the ladder, and using his arms, pulled himself up rung by rung. We slept up there Saturday night. Bobby thought he was king of the world. Hollering at everyone in our cabin to make sure, for the fiftieth time, that they knew he was up there.

Chapter 15

Wesley Forest -- Summer 1995

This year I had a new experience. My camper, Adam W., was autistic. His hobbies were reading phonebooks and newspapers. I visited him a week before camp. When I entered their house Adam W. said "Hi Mr. Roth" then started pacing around the room. I started talking about camp hoping to catch his interest. He seemed to be more interested in turning on the TV and wandering to and from his room.

As I was talking I mentioned Wesley Forest. Adam W. broke in "Wesley Forest, route 15 north just passed Liverpool turn left onto route 104. Follow 104 to Mifflinburg, turn left onto Rt. 235 toward Laurelton, turn right towards Weikert".

He repeated the directions directly out of the camp brochure. Later I got him to look at pictures. He noticed a boy he knew and repeated detailed directions (including the location of a blockbuster and McDonalds) to his house.

When Adam W. arrived he was obviously upset about his mother leaving. He kept repeating "Pick up campers around 6:00 on Thursday".

The beginning of camp was a little rough on Adam W. but he seemed to be adjusting O.K. He found a rocking chair that he loved to sit in and read a phone book. When Adam sat down and started rocking he always attracted a crowd of counselors. They all wanted to hear him repeat back the ads he read in the yellow pages, complete traffic reports, or radio DJ talk. He would use different voices for the different people. Many times we would over hear him enacting the scene when his Mother would pick him up.

There was another Adam at camp. Adam A. was 6'3" and pushing 300pds. He reminded me of the cartoon character Baby Huey. At lunchtime he was a human vacuum. One morning for breakfast we had a fruit bar. Jeremy, his counselor, arranged a large platter of watermelon, honeydew, and cantaloupe, then went back to get himself something. When he returned the plate was empty, rinds and all.

As the week progressed Adam W. really opened up. He was constantly thanking people or telling them they did a good job. After Don drove us to the dining hall he said "Good job with the bus Don". When some of the counselors did a play he commented "Good job for Laura". During any happy or exciting times he would chime in "Good job for Wesley".

When I wrote in his "camp journal" he would sit right beside me and tell me what to write. You could tell he was loosening up by reading the entries. On Monday and Tuesday we wrote "no camp Friday, no camp Saturday - Parents arrive Thursday around 6:00. By Wednesday and Thursday they changed to "Good job for Adam, good job for Dan, good job for Wesley."

One day after lunch the other camp was leading us in song. They asked if anyone knew the motions to a song. Adam A, all 300 pd. of him, yelled, "I do" and rumbled up toward the front. Jeremy tried to stop him but Jay, the dean of the other camp, yelled "Let him go, it's all right." then he turned to one of our other counselors and whispered "He's not violent is he."

One camper that really captured my heart was Timmy. He was eight years old and had a head full of red curls. He did not appear to be very high functioning and his vocabulary only consisted of a handful of words. But there was a light in his eyes that reflected his intense curiosity and wonder. Whenever he saw something that interested him, usually another camper, his blue eyes would open wide and he would smile and move towards his target. Sometimes he would just sit and watch someone with amazement in his eyes.

If you were holding a pencil Timmy would take the pencil and repeat "eyes, eyes eyes" as he took your hand and drew larger circles with smaller ones inside (eyes and eyeballs). If prompted he would add hair, nose or ears but if left on his own he would be content just drawing eyes.

By Thursday morning Adam W. had worked out an entire closing. He sat rocking in the chair saying "I would like to thank the parents for coming here today. It is time to go home. Good job to Don. Good job to Virginia. Good job to Dan. Good job to Wesley Forest. It is time to go home, don't forget your bags....."

At dinner on Thursday Melody sat with me and Adam W. After eating the other camp got up and we all knew they were going to sing us another song, and how emotional of a moment it was last year. Just before they started Melody looked at me and said, "Are we going to cry happy tears?" We did.

Chapter 16

Wesley Forest - Summer 1999

Things worked out for me and I became a last minute addition to the counselor team. Some campers were switched around and I became Evan's counselor. Evan is a very personable young man who loves the attention of the female counselors. It didn't take long for him to begin to wish that one of the young female counselors were his. Danielle, a first time counselor, was the primary target of his affection. It didn't take long for my efforts to become "not good enough". I don't know how many times I heard "It takes a strong woman to be a good counselor." What he really meant was that he would rather have Danielle helping him.

Because I was a last minute counselor, Evan was slated to sleep in a cabin with two older (by older I mean not teenagers) female counselors, Sandy and Doris. Evan was a big Michigan fan and a big Penn State hater. Sandy and Doris caught onto this and picked on him about it all week. When he was sleeping they painted his fingernails Penn State blue and White. One night they even put blue and white streaks in his hair. He would yell at them but you could tell he was enjoying the battle.

One evening they talked to a local farmer and had some animals brought in. We had our own little petting zoo. The kids really liked it. There was a sheep, calf, goat, chicken, kittens, and puppies. Evan was little leery of the lamb. But he did manage to get close enough to touch it. When he touched it, it let out a "baa..." Evan jumped and screamed. He was convinced that the sheep tried to bite him and he would not go near it again.

My Brother Jay was assigned Mark and a new camper Shawn. Don and Virginia had met Shawn before but did not realize at the time the challenge he could be. Jay was more than up for the challenge. Shawn didn't sleep well and when he woke up he would yell, loudly. Jay ended up spending most of his nights in the main room of the lodge. He was trying to avoid Shawn keeping everyone else awake. I would try to come down stairs early in the morning to at least give Jay a break to take a shower. As the week progressed Shawn started to respond to Jay. He knew who Jay was and

would respond to him. When Shawn's parents arrived Thursday they said it was one of the first times that anyone actually kept Shawn. They had sat at home waiting for the call that we couldn't take him anymore, they couldn't believe he stayed the entire week. As they were leaving Shawn walked over and put his arms around Jay. That was one of the moments that this camp is all about.

Chapter 17

Wesley Forest - Summer 2000

This year at camp I was back in Lick Run. I was to be a counselor for Nathan and Mark. All the years that Mark and I have been coming to camp this was the first time I was his counselor. Nathan was around 13 but was small for his age. He was in a wheel chair but he could feed himself and do other basic things. Jay was also in our cabin with Michael C and Phillip.

Nathan arrived for camp with his arm in a cast; it soon became obvious to me how this could happen. Nathan was never content to sit still. He was constantly unhooking the brakes on his wheel chair or trying to pull himself around the room. I had to constantly be on my toes.

Nathan was a handful but he was also delightful. He never seemed to stop smiling and always seemed to be in a good mood. He loved everything we did from the challenge course to the games. As long as he was active he was happy.

There was one part of the day that Nathan did not like, medicine time. Because of his condition he had to take what would have been a lethal dose of potassium to a normal body. Jay would usually help me with the medication and one of us would hold his nose shut and the other would try to force down the medicine. We performed this routine three times a day. After we just forced the medicine down his throat you would think that he would be upset but every time when he realized he was finished he would get a big smile on his face and give a big thumbs up.

With Nathan's attitude and Mark's sense of humor I could not help but have fun. Mark and I pulled mattresses out onto the screened in porch and slept there. It was fun for Mark and a lot nicer temperature wise for me. Mark was a lot of fun and very cooperative. He was obsessed with the Grease movies and considered himself a T-Bird. If he was hesitant to cooperate you could just say "T-Bird's man" and he would jump up and come along.

Mark also continued to carry his pencils. He carried them wherever he went (none of them would ever be sharpened). This year we played Bingo for little

prizes. Mark would get all excited if he won because he could get a new pencil.

Another new camper was Joanie. She was a bundle of energy in what appeared to be constant motion. When she first arrived she walked over the bridge pulling her suitcase turned and looked at all the counselors, whom she did not know, and said "Joanie is here". She was convinced that we were all sitting there just waiting for her to show up. She always talked about herself in the third person. "Joanie is hungry", "Joanie is a Princess", or her favorite "Look at Joanie". I found Joanie adorable and would try to talk to her when I had time. Her energy was contagious.

Cate was a new camper that instantly won my heart. She was 11 and had Cerebral Palsy. Her twin sister Elizabeth was staying with the other camp. Cate was very small for her age. She could move her arms slowly and with some effort and could talk but only by forcing out single syllables. When she first arrived Nathan and I sat with her as Sommer, her counselor, and her parents carried her stuff to her room. She appeared to instantly attach herself to me. Dan was hard for her to pronounce so for the rest of the camp I was "him". Whenever I saw her, her face would light up with a huge smile and she would say as loud as she could "Him!" and raise her little arms for a hug. When it was time to eat and she needed assistance she would say in a sweet little voice "Him help me." It melted my heart every time. You have really been hugged when you are hugged by arms that struggle to raise to hug you. How can you not be affected by a little voice that struggles to make a sound being used to call your name. Sommer did a wonderful job caring for Cate's many needs and I was glad she let me share in some of the fun parts. All week long I joked with Cate that I was going to pack her in my suitcase and take her home with me. When her Mother came to pick her up I jokingly mentioned that I forgot to pack something and I couldn't remember what it was. In her loudest voice Cate said "Me!".

Chapter 18

Nathan

A few weeks before the spring retreat Virginia received a call that Nathan, my camper from last year, had died. Through all the years of camp Nathan was the first camper to die and it hit me hard. I couldn't believe the smiling face from the year before was gone.

A good life is not measured by the number of trophies on a shelf or a long list of worldly accomplishments but by the number of hearts touched in a positive way. By these standards Nathan lived a full life. He was never content to sit back and let life pass him by. Sitting still was never part of his plans so it was not a surprise to anyone when he showed up for camp last year with his arm in a cast. It was like he was always trying to say, "There is so much to do, so much to see, why are we just sitting here. Let's go!!!".

The fruit of Nathan's life, his attitude, enthusiasm and constant smile, blessed us all. I will never forget how after each time we fought to get him to take the last bit of the hated medicine he would get a big smile and lift his hand with a big thumbs up.

We only knew Nathan for the two weeks he spent with us at camp but he will live forever in our hearts. We will truly miss him and were honored to be his counselors, camp deans and more importantly his friends.

Chapter 19

Wesley Forest - Summer 2001

The Summer of 2001 I was back in Lick Run. My campers were Marshall(a friend of Mark) and Nicholas (Nathan's brother). Jay had Michael C. and Mark. With Mark and Marshall around the cabin was always exciting.

Marshall and Mark were buddies from way back. They knew each other since pre-school. Mark brought a guitar along that he and Marshall both liked to mess around with. Marshall had an infatuation with Annie, one of the counselors. One night Marshall sat with the guitar and sang in a very loud voice over and over "Annie baby, talk to me honey". He must have gone on for half an hour. It was hilarious.

My other camper, Nicholas, was truly inspirational. He had limited control over his muscles but he was determined to do everything for himself. While it may take half an hour he would completely dress himself. It was truly inspiring to see the determination as he completed what to most of us would be an everyday task. Nicholas also never seemed to get a bad attitude. He happily went along with whatever was going on.

Joanie also came back. When she first arrived I started talking to her and she informed me that "Joanie is a princess." Shortly after that she told me that I was her King. Whenever someone would tell her what to do she would come over to me and say "My King, tell them to stop being mean to the Princess." When I would see her I would say "There is my beautiful Princess" and she would answer "Yep, that's right."

Amie, my brother's girlfriend, was Joanie's counselor. She also had Kate. Kate was a quiet little girl with Down's Syndrome. She wouldn't speak a lot and then only to a small set of people. Every time I got near her she would point her finger at me and say, "You go time out." I would pretend like I was crying and say I am sorry and then she would chuckle and walk away. For the most part, that was the extent of our interactions.

Cate and her counselor Danielle shared a cabin with Amie and her campers. As soon as Cate arrived it was obvious that she remembered me. I was still "him". The first night, shortly after I had fallen asleep I saw someone wandering through our cabin. It was Amie. Cate couldn't sleep and she asked if I would come over. Danielle and I took Cate over to the porch of the main lodge and I held and rocked her until it seemed like she would fall asleep. Danielle said she got up one other time but after that slept pretty well. Campers like Cate can be the most demanding. They not only have physical needs but they also have the challenge of figuring out what they are trying to tell you. Danielle, who was only 17, did a wonderful job caring for Cate and showed maturity beyond her years. Cate was lucky to have her.

We had another new camper, Naseem. Naseem is a beautiful young lady with an adorable personality. At first she was really quite and seemed withdrawn but as she got to know people she joined in the fun. Jay told Naseem that he had tickets to the Destiny's Child concert so every time Naseem saw Jay she would go over and hold her hand out and say "Please.....". When Jay told her she couldn't have them she would tell Jay, in a joking tone, that he was mean. We all enjoyed having Naseem around and hope she comes back.

Danielle's younger sister Anissa was assigned Toby. Toby was about 12 years old and was autistic. He didn't provide much verbal feedback but his face and actions were very expressive. He carried around a rope and would constantly be playing with it or wearing it around his neck. He seemed to like interacting with people but did not like to be forced into things. I think he was like most autistic kids in that he seemed to want to interact with you but his system overloads so quickly that it is difficult for him to. Nissa did a great job taking care of Toby and his reactions reflected that.

Chapter 20

Wesley Forest - Summer 2002

This year my camper was Hunter Moff. Hunter was 9 years old, but physically he was the size of a four or five year old. His vocabulary consisted of short sentences that were sometimes difficult to understand. Hunter also had an incredible amount of energy and curiosity. He was constantly on the run and into everything.

Hunter's sister Sydney also came along to camp. After they arrived their mother went with Sydney and her counselor. Their Father and I took Hunter and his stuff to our room. Hunter was not content to sit as his Dad offered advice on dealing with him. So his Father tried to shout out as much advice as he could as we both chased Hunter around the camp.

After his parents left I let Hunter explore around the camp. He was fascinated with the creek and the fire ring. He was convinced that the creek was full of "ow-ye-gators" and crocodiles.

After an hour of exploring the camp area it was time to walk to lunch. Walk may not be the best way to describe our journey to lunch, Hunter loved to run. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way to the dining hall there is a small man-made frog pond. You could almost always see a few frogs sitting on the rocks or lily pads. Hunter loved the frog pond. He would run up to the frog pond saying "Touch it, touch it" or "Catch one". A few times Hunter did manage to touch a frog that was sitting in the grass or on a rock close to the edge. Before and after every meal we would stop at the frog pond. As the week wore on I became more and more appreciative of the break we took at the frog pond. It provided a little rest before we finished our run to the dining hall.

Once at the dining hall Hunter would head over to a stuffed Bear and Deer displayed in the corner. Depending on his mood Hunter either wanted to hug them, take them home or shoot them. We would then wander through the tables until it was closer to the time to eat. Usually he would sit through the meal but there was an occasional piece of flying silverware and once a "spilled" glass of milk.

As it got closer to bedtime I made the bed up furthest from the door for Hunter and the bed closest to the door for myself. Around 8:15 Hunter said he was going to bed, climbed up the stairs, climbed in my bed and fell asleep. If he was going to sleep I was going to let him sleep where ever he wanted.

I was worried about him getting up at night so I took the mattress off of what was to be his bed and put it on the floor next to the bed he was now sleeping in. I slept there. If Hunter got up I would know. Around 2:00 am I heard Hunter sit up in bed. I sat up and leaned in close so he could see I was there. He kissed me on the cheek, went back to sleep, and slept the rest of the night.

Hunter was very concerned toward all the campers in wheelchairs. Whenever he saw them he would go over to them and hug and kiss them. We would gather everyday as a group for worship. Because of Hunter's attention span I wouldn't join the group until the last minute. All the other campers would already be there. The wheelchairs usually gathered together in the widest area. Hunter would move from wheel chair to wheelchair giving each camper a hug.

The second morning Hunter woke up before me (or anyone else). Once Hunter was awake he was awake! So I quickly got dressed, got him dressed and took Hunter to the bathroom to get ready for the day. The bathroom was large with 2 showers and a few sinks. I got Hunter started brushing his teeth. As I was trying to put my contacts in Hunter became bored and headed for the door. He opened the door and was heading for the hallway. I stopped him and moved my stuff to the sink closer to the door. I finished putting my contacts and brushing my teeth with my foot holding the door shut. By 6:15am we were out at the basketball hoop shooting the baskets.

Hunter was funny to watch when he was shooting a basketball. For someone his size he could make a large number of baskets. After he made a basket he would either say "Michael Jordan" or "Good job, Thank-you your welcome".

Sydney, Hunter's sister, was a big help to me. Often times Sydney would help me understand what Hunter was trying to say. Hunter would often go through periods of high energy where he would run from place to place

getting into everything. Right before one of these episodes he would start giggling. Sydney told me that was his "bad laugh".

One day Hunter and I were down by the creek. Hunter was searching around the trees for stones and pinecones. I saw him pick something up and say "Hug it" and move it toward his face to kiss it. I got his hand before it reach his face and saw he was holding a crayfish head. It was just the shell, left over from a Raccoons lunch. I took the shell and threw it into creek. He was very angry at me and wanted me to jump in the creek to go get it back. When I wouldn't give in he kicked me in shins. I sat Hunter on a nearby chair until he calmed down. After a few minutes he got up, walked over to me, put his hands on my cheeks, said "Sar-wee" and kissed my cheek.

As the week wore on I found the things that would keep Hunter still for a while. Someone that Don knew had donated a whole box of stickers. There were literally thousands of stickers in the box. Every once in a while Hunter would go into the craft room where the stickers were and look through the box. He would carefully look through all of the stickers. Pick three or four and put them on his shirt.

Sometimes when Hunter got angry he would kick or push something. Usually I could anticipate these and prevent any damage. One day we were at the cafeteria. After meals Hunter liked to carry the dirty dishes to the kitchen area to be washed, so I assumed that he may also like carrying the milk over to our table. I got a cup of coffee, picked up the water pitcher and tried to hand Hunter the milk. In the mean time Hunter saw a loaf of bread and decided he wanted a piece. I told him that we couldn't eat yet. He not only didn't take the milk but he started kicking the trash can. I was standing there holding coffee, a water pitcher, and a carton of milk. I spilled my coffee trying to put them down, and I still didn't get to him in time to prevent the can from being kicked over. Luckily it was before the meal started and there was not much in it.

Hunter loved baseball. He was constantly searching for anything to use as a bat and ball. Sometimes he would sit on the ground and pick up a little stick and a small pinecone and hit the pinecone with the stick.

Someone from Don's church created a miniature golf course for us. They built portable castles and windmills for us to hit the ball through. A local miniature golf course donated some old putters and we used tennis balls for golf balls. Hunter loved the game ! He was pretty good at hitting the ball through the targets, but he would pull back the club and hit the ball really hard. Then he would yell "Home Run" and chase after the ball.

We had some rain on Thursday so as we were walking to the dining hall for our last dinner of the year there were puddles on the road. Hunter managed to find every puddle. Initially I tried to stop him but then I realized that we were at camp and Hunter wouldn't have been Hunter if he would have walked by the puddles.

Before the beginning of this week I thought that Hunter would be hyper-active, stubborn, and prone to tantrums. I wasn't wrong. But these are symptoms of his disease not who he is. Hunter is the little boy who loves baseball so much that even a small twig and a tiny pinecone become a bat and ball. He is the little hands on my face and the little voice saying "Sar-wee" after getting angry. Hunter is running to the dining hall and running back, stopping only to chase frogs or hug the kids in wheel chairs. Hunter is jumping in every mud puddle on the way to lunch. On the first night at camp, after chasing him around all day, Hunter woke up in the middle of the night. I immediately thought about the note from his mother on his health form stating that Hunter got home sick and cried for his parents. I went over to let him know someone was there. He leaned over, put his hands on either side of my face, gave me a kiss on the cheek, laid down and went back to sleep. At that moment my apprehension left and I knew everything would be o.k.. At that moment Hunter left a permanent mark on my heart.

Chapter 21

Wesley Forest - Spring 2003

After all the campers arrived we met in the lodge. Don had everyone introduce themselves. Tina, who has been a counselor since 1989, recently completed her nursing degree and was the camp nurse for the weekend. Don asked if anyone knew what was special about Tina. Melody said "She's so cute!" Don asked if anyone knew anything else and Melody answered again "She's so nice!" Don then explained that she was the nurse.

Hunter came back and I was his counselor. I also helped out with Bobby. Bobby is very independent and doesn't really need much help. Virginia also helped allot with with Bobby so it all worked out. Bobby is also fun to have around the cabin. He has a great sense of humor and is very patient with the younger campers. He is also very meticulous. He likes things exactly the way he wants. One morning I was trying to hold back Hunter and encourage Bobby to come along, but Bobby was convinced his bed had to be made perfectly. Well just as Bobby was finishing his bed Hunter climbed up on it. Bobby wasn't very happy.

The biggest difference for Hunter was that we were in Lick Run, the largest of the side cabins, instead of upstairs in the lodge. This worked well for Hunter because we were in a bigger room with more people. So there were always extra hands and eyes around if I needed five or ten minutes.

We had a rainy day on Friday and Saturday morning so there were lots of puddles. If we passed a puddle of any size Hunter would say "Turtles? Frogs? Catch one? Maybe!" Any large puddle Hunter was convinced contained alligators or crocodiles.

At the dining hall there is always a basket of apples and oranges. On Saturday morning Hunter said he wanted an Orange. I gave him one. He threw it to me, pulled his hands back like he was holding a baseball bat and said "pitch it, pitch it".

Hunter loved helping clear off the dirty dishes from the table. He is also very meticulous about scraping every last piece of food off the plates into the

garbage can before returning the dishes to be cleaned. One time someone was handing in a plate with a tiny piece of food left on it. Hunter ran over and took the plate from them, took it to the garbage can and made sure that the last bit of food was gone before he returned it to the dish return. After Hunter cleared every plate from our table he would start looking around at everyone else's table and grab their plates to take up. The biggest problem was making sure that the people were actually finished eating before he took their plate away.

When Hunter's parents returned on Friday I was happy to hear that he and Sydney would be returning for the summer.

Chapter 22

Wesley Forest - Summer 2003

This summer I was Hunter's counselor again. Hunter looked pretty much the same as last year, only a little taller. As soon as he jumped out of the van it was obvious that he remembered camp. He ran right over to the bridge and starting looking for frogs. He was very excited to be here. We immediately took a whirlwind tour of our camp area. He went from the fire ring to the creek to the bridge.

It was really great seeing the campers again. In a lot of ways it's like a family reunion. A lot of hugs and laughs. Some campers have been coming back for years. Even though we usually only see each other for one week a year, you still develop strong bonds and great friendships. One particularly cute reunion was Kate S. She is a very quite young lady who usually does not show a lot of emotion. When she got out of her car and saw Danielle, her counselor, she did a little skipping dance over to her with a huge smile on her face and gave her a big hug.

Hunter really loved the kids in wheel chairs. One boy, Kiel, was his favorite. Kiel also happen to be in our cabin. Every time Hunter saw Kiel he would run up and give him a kiss on the shoulder. Kiel would smile and laugh every time.

On Sunday the campers arrive in the afternoon so Monday is the first day that we swim. At swim time we can either go to the creek or the lake. Last year Hunter didn't like the lake very much but he wanted to go so we did. He played around the edges and did manage to sit in the water once or twice. Mostly he hunted for frogs and crabs. Another counselor watched him long enough for me to take Cate out on a boat ride.

The next day we tried the stream. When Hunter realized we were heading to the part of the creek where we swim he led the way. The path has a couple forks in the road but he always chose the correct one. Hunter loved the creek. He played ball with another camper and hunted for "crabs".

Ami's camper was a young lady named Jen. Jen was a very nice and friendly girl who helped me out a lot. She loved chasing after Hunter. One day Jen, Hunter and I were running back from lunch when she looked over at me and said "You keep up with him pretty good for someone your age."

On Monday afternoon we went to the local sportsman's park. They had a bear, some deer, fish, turkey, pheasant and other birds. Hunter loved it. He got so excited he didn't know what to do first. He ran back and forth from animal to animal. Jen stayed with us and she kept up with him and I followed behind staying within eye site. He got to feed the fish and bear and really loved that.

Hunter started walking toward the Turkey pen. When he got about 2 feet away the Turkey turned and gobbled at him. Hunter was terrified. He turned and ran away yelling "Turkey bit me, Turkey bit me." After he calmed down he said he wanted to "shoot it" and "put it in a bag".

Hunter also loved going to the craft room. Every day we have a half hour time with the camp craft person. Hunter loved to cut, paint and color. He couldn't wait to go to "Arts". If he had papers, paint, and markers he was happy.

We still stopped to and from every trip to the dining hall at the frog pond. Hunter was very disappointed that he couldn't get close enough to touch any. One of the counselors from the other camp overheard Hunter getting frustrated at not being able to "catch one" and equally frustrated that I wouldn't jump in the pond and get the ones sitting out on lily pads.

Wednesday evening we have a cook-out at the fire ring near our cabin. The camp staff drives down with all the supplies. The counselor who overheard our conversation had caught a little frog, put him in a cup with foil over the top and sent him along down with the food. We found a bigger container and put the frog in it. Hunter loved it. About an hour later Judy, one of the other camp deans, came walking into camp with her hand over a Styrofoam cup. They caught a bigger frog and she carried it down for Hunter. Hunter got to actually touch this frog. After touching it and watching it for a while we set it free.

When Thursday came around I again found myself wishing for a little more time. Camp is a magical place. We leave all our problems and worries at home for a week and come together in a place where we all have a common purpose. I always leave thankful for the opportunity to be here.

Chapter 23

Wesley Forest – Spring 2004

I left work at 4:00 hoping to get to the retreat by 6:00 or 6:15 to give myself a little time to mentally shift from work to camp. Well, my plan didn't exactly work – I ran into heavy traffic and was caught behind some accidents. I didn't arrive until 7:15, by that time everyone was there.

I located Hunter rummaging through the books with his Mother. She said her good-byes, wished us luck and headed out. Hunter looked pretty much like last year only bigger and (as I was soon to find out) faster. It was obvious that he remembered camp.

There is a door in the back of the main lodge that leads to a storage closet. The door has a small hole in it (big enough to put a few fingers into). Hunter said there was an alligator behind the door, so I jokingly put my fingers in the hole, then quickly pulled them out and pretended that the alligator bit me. From that moment on whenever Hunter got near that door he would run up and quickly kick it then run back away.

Jimmy was also sharing a room with Hunter and I. Jimmy is a very pleasant and happy young man with down's syndrome. He is always singing, usually songs from a church hymnal. I never saw Jimmy sad or angry. He rolls along with whatever is going on with an upbeat attitude and cheerful smile.

On Saturday as we headed up for breakfast it was obvious that Hunter knew where he was going. He took off running up the hill. He stopped at the frog pond. I remembered last year how much he wanted to catch one so I had bought some small rubber frogs and every time we stopped I would hide one in the rocks and let him find it. He would keep them in his jacket pocket – by the end of the weekend he was carrying 10 little frogs with him wherever he went.

We had our first confrontation after lunch. In Hunter's mind after lunch you went swimming – and he was convinced he was going swimming. After knowing Hunter for a few years, I have learned to anticipate when he is going to get very angry and I remove him from the group and find a quiet

place for him to sit until he calms down. The angry times never last long and pretty soon he his back chasing frogs and jumping in mud puddles.

Once again the weekend flew by. I can't wait until July.

Chapter 24

Wesley Forest – July 2004

When their van pulled up Hunter was out the door before his Father could shut the engine off. He jumped out of the van and ran right over to me. He wanted to go hunting for frogs. I convinced him to let us get his stuff to the cabin before we chased frogs.

Hunter loves the arts and crafts room (“arts” to him). If there is markers, paint or stickers involved he is happy. I literally had to drag him out of the craft room at the end of each session. If I would have let him he would have stayed in there all day. The hard part of crafts is that paint brushes and hammers in Hunter's hands means he requires even more supervision than normal.

All morning Hunter would ask over and over about putting his bathing suit on and going swimming. We would change for swimming right before lunch then after lunch we went over to the lake. Each day he would get all excited and be the first one at the lake. He never got in. He would walk around the bank for 10-15 minutes then want to go back and take a shower (which was o.k. because the bank along the pond was pretty muddy and the water near the edge was a little slimy). I tried to convince him to go back to the stream (which he enjoyed last year) but his mind was made up.

One day while Hunter was distracted along the side of the pond, I managed to make sure Cate and I had our annual boat ride. Cate's counselor made sure Hunter was safe. I took Cate, Peter and Marshall out on a row boat. I spent more time with Cate her first couple years when she needed me more. Now she is more comfortable at camp but I still manage our boat ride and every night I still visit her cabin. She is always sitting up waiting for me to put her in bed and tuck her in.

This year I had a nightly companion on my walk to Cate's cabin. Chelsea, a friend of Cate's from school, would walk along to say goodnight. When Chelsea first arrived she was very withdrawn and quiet. She would let you lead her somewhere but would not interact much. But as the days progressed (mostly due to the great work of Anissa, her counselor) she

would open up more and more. On Sunday, when she first started talking, she would talk to and through Allison, her doll. It didn't take long for her to start talking without the doll and as the days progressed we saw an amazing transformation. The girl that was now running down the road laughing and making jokes did not at all seem like the one that earlier appeared so withdrawn. When Chelsea was approached by someone she didn't know she would sometimes close down again for a while. Luckily as the days rolled on we saw more and more of the happy Chelsea.

Naseem also came back. She would always tell Jay how mean he was and how he wishes he wasn't there but then she would sit with him at every meal and follow him around. Naseem had come to the camp in June and was upset that Jay wasn't there so she convinced her mother to let her come to the July camp too.

Because a lot of our campers were getting older, the age ranges for the June and July camp were combined. Basically it meant that now campers could pick the June or July camp instead of being forced to one or the other. Because of that change Peter was back at camp with Jay and I for the first time in 7-8 years. You would think that it would take a while for us to get to know each other again. But after about 10 minutes it was like we still saw each other every Tuesday at cub scouts. It was great to have him around again.

Danielle was the counselor for J.J. He was my camper in [1990](#). We hadn't been at camp with him for 14 years. He was a little bigger than the boy I had way back then but not by much. When I was his counselor we collected things that caught his interest and he would ask for his "toys". This year he brought his own bag of "toys" along. J.J. is blind and liked to have things for his hands to do when he was waiting. When he wanted them he would ask for his "toys please". Another great thing about J.J. is that he would break out in song at any time. "Happy Birthday" was one of his favorites.

After three years together Hunter and I have gotten to know each other pretty well. I can usually anticipate when he may get mad or lash out and he has learned to tolerate my idiosyncrasies. The biggest difference between this year and last was that he was bigger, stronger, and faster and I was

older, slower and weaker. I guess I better start working out to keep up for next year!

Chapter 25

Wesley Forest – Spring 2005

This year we had our retreat cut short. The campers arrived Friday night and by Saturday morning we were preparing them to leave. The rain was forecast to continue and the creeks were rising. The area around our cabins was prone to flooding and last fall the area did flood. It wasn't worth the risk so we called the parents Saturday morning to come and get their campers.

Chapter 26

Wesley Forest – June 2005

This year, because of a personal conflict, I attended the June camp instead of July. I knew I would miss some of the July regulars, but there were some June campers that I haven't been at camp with for a long time. I was particularly glad to be at camp with Michael P again. He was part of our cub scout troop and I have known him for a long time. I had not been at camp with him for years.

When Michael P arrived it was like we just saw each other yesterday. It was great to talk to him again. Michael always seems to be in a good mood and can always make me laugh. He is also very good at guessing the artist that performed almost any pop songs from the 50's, 60's or 70's. I tried my limited knowledge against him but his knowledge far exceeded mine.

I was Hunter's counselor again. Hunter was a few inches taller but still small for his age. His need to run all the time seemed to have slowed down but he was still very active and still required 100% attention. Hunter was happy to be in the cabin with Evan. Hunter knows Evan from their t-ball team and he really likes him.

Another change from previous years is that my brother Jay didn't attend camp. He was home helping take care of Ami and his second son, Isaac. Instead of Jay, my nephew Andrew came along. Andrew is 14 and was the counselor for Evan. I anticipated having to help him a lot. It would have been understandable if at only 14 he required a lot of help, but that wasn't the case. Andy took control of Evan and did everything that would be expected of a counselor much older than he was. Andy ended up helping me more with Hunter than I helped him with Evan.

This year, we set-up a covered area a little way from the rest of the camp to be used for worship. Every day a few counselors would act out a play that took place on a farm. Each day the play had a new lesson. It was a great way to keep the campers attention and help them learn about loving God and helping others. After the play Don would have a girls vs boys quiz on the story.

Chapter 27

Wesley Forest – July 2006

I was back with Hunter this year but this time we were in the main lodge. We shared a room with Alex, a new camper. Hunter grew a good bit since last year – but he still loved frogs. As soon as he arrived he wanted to go find frogs in the creek.

Another change was Hunter actually got in the lake. Previous years he would hang around the edge for a few minutes then leave. This year he actually got in the lake up to his shoulders. He even jumped off the dock a few times.

Hunter's favorite camper is Naseem. Naseem can get right in Hunter's face and tell him he's being bad or to stop doing something and Hunter let's her – usually he just smiles. Maybe it's Naseem's good nature and friendly personality.

For worship this year each of the campers were in a skit. In one skit Joanie had a tooth-ache and had a bad dream about a bad dentist with a big drill and shot. Naseem was the dentist and she wore an ugly mask. Kate S. was the mother and did a great job acting out her her prompts. All the skits were very entertaining. The last skit of the week was put on by some of the counselors. Milton's performance as an old lady was one to remember.

It was also fun to see Peter again. Peter has been coming to camp since 1989. I still remember the little guy that used to run around pretending he was a ninja turtle or robo-cop. He's now taller than I am. He did inform me that he has way too many problems with his business --- Private Detective and Match Maker.

Conclusion

No matter how many years I go to camp, or who my campers are, one thing remains constant. I always leave feeling like something special was given to me, not the other way around. I take seriously the awesome responsibility I see behind the love and trust visible in the eyes of the campers. I can only hope they get out of camp at least a small percentage of what I do. I am not the same person who first stepped into that cub scout room almost 20 years ago. Because of the people, campers and counselors, on the previous pages of this story I am a better person. I have been taught the real meaning of courage, perseverance and unconditional love. I have been shown a standard I can only hope to one day live up to and I am deeply indebted to each of them for that.

Being a Special Needs Counselor is:

...little arms that barely work struggling to lift up to give you a hug

...watching with pride as your camper struggles and accomplishes what to most of us would be an everyday task

...being King to a Princess, even if the kingdom only lives in the Princess' imagination

...looking into the eyes of the boy with Cerebral Palsy, totally dependent upon you for care,

and seeing nothing but trust looking back

...being buddy to the boy used to being made fun of, or even worse, ignored

...hearing a little voice force out "Him help me" and knowing you are him

...being part of a family with a common goal accomplishing something greater than the sum of our individual parts

...rocking a nervous little girl, not used to being away from home, to sleep in your arms and her finding comfort there

...seeing the tears in the eyes of the parent of the severely handicapped child as they explain how they sat by the phone all week expecting the call that we couldn't keep their child any longer, and the relief they felt when the call didn't come

...helping catch a first fish, row a first boat or swim in a lake

...rediscovering the joy in chasing frogs and jumping in mud puddles

...the tear on your cheek as you perform the hardest task of the week, saying good-bye

...never looking at the world or people the same way again

...letting God use us, and all of our weakness and frailty, to be his hands and his feet and recognizing him in the hands and feet of those that he sends to help us.