

CAMPERS OFTEN RETURN TO HELP KIDS WITH CANCER

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Campers and counselors at Camp Fantastic paddle their canoes during a plastic duck hunt. The camp is one of the oldest pediatric oncology camps in the world, with staff from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Md., providing free medical care during the week. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)



Gavin Russell, 8, is attending Camp Fantastic at the Northern Virginia 4-H Educational Center south of Front Royal. The camp was founded by Tom and Sheila Baker, of Winchester, after the death of their 13-year-old daughter, Julie, to lymphoma in 1976.



Abby Snider, 16, is undergoing the camp's leaders-in-training program and plans to return as a counselor after she turns 17.



Gavin Russell, 8, paddles a canoe with counselor Cait Farren at Camp Fantastic. Held each summer since 1983, the camp is for children ages 7 to 17 who are current cancer patients or within three years of treatment. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)

FRONT ROYAL — Having battled leukemia herself, 16-year-old Abby Snider wants to help other kids with cancer by becoming a counselor at Camp Fantastic.

The Mountain View Christian Academy student was among the 102 kids who attended this year's camp at the Northern Virginia 4-H Educational Center, near Front Royal.

Camp Fantastic, now in its 33rd year, is a week-long adventure for children ages 7 to 17 who have received cancer-specific treatment within the past three years.

At this year's camp, kids rode horses, swam, conducted science experiments and spent time around the campfire with other kids who have faced or are facing similar challenges.

New this year were the science experiments, some of which gave kids ideas for the annual talent show.

Abby, who is undergoing the leaders-in-training program, said Thursday that she would be returning to Camp Fantastic as a counselor after she turns 17.

"The bond you form with these kids, they just love you and look up to you," she said. "I just want to be at camp as long as possible."

Camp Fantastic was founded by Tom and Sheila Baker, of Winchester, after the death of their 13-year-old daughter, Julie, to lymphoma in 1976. She had been sick for about nine months.

It is one of the oldest pediatric oncology camps in the world, with staff from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Md., providing free medical care during the week.

The camp is outfitted with all the medical services and facilities that campers need — from blood tests to chemotherapy — and is prepared to take even the sickest children and allow them to be at camp.

Charles Butler, a retired NIH recreational therapy supervisor, has been a volunteer at camp every year since its inception.

“I would say we take the sickest kids of any camp in the country,” Butler said on Thursday. “Some of them are in wheelchairs, we have one girl who is blind.”

He said that some of the more seriously ill children are given a counselor devoted just to them — called one-on-one counseling.

He said when it began, Camp Fantastic was one of the first of its kind, and is now one of about 50.

“We have kids who come here, meet other campers, and become friends for life,” he said.

Most of the campers are from Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

Gavin Russell, 8, said on Thursday that his favorite activities were all about the water.

“Canoeing is the most fun,” the Winchester native said as he put on a life vest and grabbed a paddle. “Except for when I tip [the boat], ’cause then I get kind of freaked out.”

Robin Couch Cardillo, director of development for Special Love — the nonprofit group that organizes Camp Fantastic — said some people may not know about the group or what it does.

In recent years, the organization — located at 117 Youth Development Drive in Winchester — has worked with about 20 local families.

Some have sent children to Camp Fantastic or BRASS (Brothers and Sisters) Camp, which is for siblings of cancer patients. BRASS was created because siblings often feel ignored as their parents focus on the sick child.

Other families have received emergency financial assistance from Special Love when they’ve needed help paying the mortgage, rent or a utility bill.

Getaways also are offered for parents, families and cancer survivors age 18 to 25.

College scholarships are available.

In addition to Abby attending Camp Fantastic, her younger sister, Emma, attended BRASS Camp in Maryland.

Baker said it’s good that kids like Abby become counselors, and that he was sure the camp would continue as strong as it has because of it.

“The campers come back here, and they take care of these kids like they were their own.”

September is National Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

For more information about Special Love, go to speciallove.org, or call 540-667-3774.

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