

# Camp Simba – Camp with a Heart

By Sally Ong Shin Yee



**M**any years ago, a family friend who attended the same church died after a long and protracted battle with nasopharyngeal cancer. As a child, I did not fully comprehend the disease – what I saw was a kind man in his 30s suffering from an immeasurable amount of pain and despair. When he died, I developed an intense fear of cancer. At about the same time, my best friend in primary school lost her father to cancer. His death affected her tremendously. She was sad and scared but did not have anyone to talk to – in our town in Malaysia, illness, death and dying are not topics that are freely discussed at home, in school or among friends. Children are often left to grapple with these issues on their own.

When a medical school classmate suggested in September last year that we take the children of terminally-ill patients out for a day, I was immediately attracted to the idea. It reminded me of Camp Kesem, a week-long summer camp in the United States for children of cancer patients. The founder of Camp Kesem North Carolina had been a teaching assistant in a social entrepreneurship class I took as an undergraduate student at Duke University. I emailed him about organising a similar camp in Singapore. He and his fellow colleagues responded enthusiastically and they generously shared materials from Camp Kesem with us.

Over the next few weeks, I shared the idea of organising a camp for children of cancer patients with anyone who was willing to listen. Bianca Chan, the community service director at Duke-



*A camper lies on his facilitator, Nigel Tan, for support*

NUS at that time, threw her full support behind the idea after visualising how five children of a hospice care patient she was visiting could benefit from such a camp. She was visiting the patient's home for a palliative course assignment and realised that the patient's children were not able to enjoy the simple joys of childhood and of growing up. The family stopped going

for picnic outings to East Coast Park and shopping on Orchard Road. Because of cancer, their family life was disrupted. The children had to wrestle with issues like death and loss at a young age.

When I met with Charlene Kwa, the community service representative from Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, she was also very receptive to the idea. We decided over hot steaming mugs of coffee

# Medical Students' Mailbox



Aditi and Esther, part of the organising committee, racing each other at the Luge.



The camp mascot playing with a camper.

at Starbucks that students from both medical schools would collaborate on such a project. After that initial meeting, Charlene and I put together a committee to organise the camp. The committee was made up of both Duke-NUS and YLLSOM students. From January to May 2009, we applied for and received funding, carefully selected our facilitators through an application and interview process, publicised the camp through the local hospice and cancer support networks and attended to a thousand little details necessary to make the camp happen. We also decided to name the project 'Camp Simba' since 'Simba' means courage as well as lion in Swahili.

During the selection and training process, we learned that all our medical student volunteers had strong personal reasons for wanting to be involved. After all, Camp Simba was a significant time commitment for individuals who were busy learning and memorising the intricate details of the human body. Some had lost their parents to cancer and wanted to be the source of support that they wished they had had when they were younger. Others had felt moved

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by close friends who have lost parents to cancer.

After months of planning and convincing sceptics that Camp Simba would fulfil a currently unmet need in Singapore, May 30 and 31 finally arrived! At 7.30 am on Saturday, May 30, we waited anxiously for our children at Harbourfront Station. Each and every one of our registered participants showed up, much to our excitement and relief. We then took them to Costa Sands Resort in Sentosa where the camp was to be held. Over the two days of camp, we took our campers to Nature Walk, the

Luge and Skyride, Songs of the Sea and organised numerous games and activities for them. There were icebreaker and team-based beach games, stargazing on the beach, a picnic lunch, a BBQ dinner, a martial arts and exercise session, trust walk and an art therapy session.

The theme of the camp was Lion King and we put the campers into groups named after characters in the movie. We were also fortunate to have Nico Oey, a medical student volunteer, dress up in a lion costume to entertain the kids. We ended the camp with a closing ceremony, which featured a 10-minute picture slideshow of the camp and the presentation of prizes to the teams. We were honoured to have the Deans of both medical schools, Prof Ranga Krishnan from Duke-NUS and Prof John Wong from YLLSOM attend the ceremony and share the camp experience with us.

Even though the objective of the camp was to provide these children with a weekend of fun and a break from a challenging period in their home lives, we were always attentive and aware of the seriousness of the children's family situations. One of our campers had to

leave the camp suddenly on Saturday because his father was admitted into the Accident and Emergency ward. Another child told us about his father's death just the previous week and had innocently asked if we were like the doctors who took care of his father. (We told him that we were training to become doctors.)

After months of planning, the two days of camp passed by too quickly for me. I enjoyed every second spent with the children. Some of them were incredibly mischievous and playful but I was more amused than annoyed by their pranks and games. Others were very sweet and gentle, and their unbroken spirit taught me a lot about undiminished hope and optimism in the face of illness and death. The older children were more reserved during the camp. As the camp progressed however, they slowly started to open up as well. It warmed my heart to learn that they had exchanged their contact information so that they could continue to stay in touch and be a source of support to one another after the camp.

Organising the camp also allowed me a unique opportunity to work closely with medical students from both Duke-NUS and YLLSOM. These individuals

are some of the most inspiring and amazing people I have ever worked with. As a medical student, I am well aware of how challenging it is to be involved with the camp. Many of us gave up social activities, sleep and personal time for the camp. All of us went above and beyond to make sure that the children had the best weekend in Sentosa. There are too many examples to list here but I will try to share a few with you.

Esther Chang, a Duke-NUS student and Paul Wan, a YLLSOM student, visited one of the parents in the Gynaecology Oncology ward to assure her that her children would be well-taken care of during the camp. They ended staying until 11pm, past visiting hours, talking to her about her family life and the effects of her illness on her children. They had stayed because the mother needed to talk, even though it was a weeknight and Esther had a quiz while Paul had to be in clinic the next day.

Other examples involve our facilitators who worked most closely with the children and were able to build relationships with them. Cheryl Lin gave a camper a piggyback ride for 20 minutes during the Nature Walk because the camper was afraid of mud and insects.

Tan Pei Ling organised a group to help a family in need repaint their house. Aaron Koh tried to be a source of support to his campers after their father passed away. Meanwhile, Joseph Toh and Wang Ziting made individualised notes and gifts for their campers. Our facilitators built such good rapport with their campers that they were invited to one camper's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.

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## Want to help?

We met up with our campers at HCA Hospice Care last month for our first reunion session. We watched "Bolt" and ate fried chicken from KFC. We are planning two more reunion sessions this year, one in September and another in December. We are hoping to take the campers to the Zoo in September and are currently raising funds for the trip. If you would like to help us with the reunion sessions or with the camp next year, please mail a cheque to:

**Medical Society, National University of Singapore  
c/o the Dean's Office,  
Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine,  
National University of Singapore  
10 Kent Ridge Crescent,  
Singapore 119260**

Please make your check payable to "Medical Society, National University of Singapore" with "Camp Simba" in the memo line.



Campers with their feet bound together in a game to build trust and confidence among team members.