

REFLECTIONS ON CAMP SIMBA 2010

By Christopher Ross Schlieve and Wu Lin Chieh

In late 2008, student leaders from the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine planned a collaborative effort – a weekend camp for children of cancer patients to be held in 2009. Following its success, and by popular demand, we held Camp Simba again from 28-30 May 2010. Here are the personal reflections from two camp councillors as they discuss what the camp means to them. Enjoy!

Christopher: When I was chosen to be a facilitator for this year's Camp Simba, I couldn't help but be excited and nervous all at once. In the past, I had been involved with many summer programmes in the United States aimed at getting minority and disadvantaged children introduced to education and volunteerism, so naturally I felt that Camp Simba would be a great opportunity for me to get involved in a cause that I knew would be a truly amazing experience.

It got me to really think about what many of my former students went through during the initial days before and during camp. What were they anticipating the night before? What were

they looking forward to and hoping would happen? How important is that first interaction with their peer counselor? Being a Caucasian male, how was I perceived by my students and what barriers did we have to overcome? So many questions flew through my head and then suddenly, there I was at Harbourfront MRT at 7.00am waiting for my kids to arrive.

Initially, my kids arrived shadowed by their parents. Shyness seemed to get the best of them, as it does most kids initially. We all started with the usual introductions, asking if they were able to sleep last night because they could not contain their excitement. In response, my kids gave me usual bashful nods from behind their parents' arms. The initial interaction concerned me a bit, but as we departed for Sentosa, everybody was starting to come out of his or her shell. By the time the train arrived at Beach Station, I doubt I could have stopped any of my kids from revealing everything and anything about themselves. Contrary to my initial concerns, I was easily welcomed by my kids. We hit it off amazingly well and every day was filled with laughter, excitement and fun. All of the facilitators had such a great time

throughout the day that I often wondered if the camp was secretly designed for the medical student's entertainment rather than the kids, but our enthusiasm and spontaneity fueled the hearts of the kids.

I must admit that I enjoyed the beach games and Sentosa attractions thoroughly, but the best part of camp for me and my kids was the time we got to spend relaxing and getting to know each other more. It gave us a chance to share stories about our lives and find out about all the commonalities we had. Who would've thought that I had so much in common with someone half my age!? One of my kids loved 80's music and could recite more bands in that era than I could. Every day we learnt more about each other and had a blast participating in all of the activities. My kids and I could relate on many different levels and even after only a few days, I felt like I was their "big brother".

I can honestly admit that before the start of the camp, I was concerned about how the children would relate to me. Coming from the United States, I felt that I was exposed to a variety of people and cultural backgrounds. But it wasn't until I came to Singapore that I

realised what I had experienced was a different type of exposure, and that my introduction to new cultures had only just begun. I learnt a lot from interacting and observing the kids at camp. Seeing them recognise, acknowledge and befriend others from diverse backgrounds was a very heartening experience. It's very fortunate that the children here have the opportunity to live in such a diverse society as Singapore. Children have the chance to learn from each other's varied backgrounds and build friendships that often become barriers for others. At such a young age, these children are more culturally aware than many of my counterparts in the United States and it gave me a great sense of humility and hope for the future generation.

I miss my kids already and greatly look forward to the reunions. I'm excited to offer my help to them for years to come in whatever capacity I can. In three days, we managed to build a bond that I know will grow and continue to develop for years to come. I look forward to guiding them through the good times and being there when they need me. Camp Simba isn't just a weekend; it's a start to a lifelong friendship.



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Fun & Games

(1) Under the hot sun, Lin Chieh is helping the children with one of the many beach games during Camp Simba 2010. (2) One of the facilitators talking to a camper while taking a break along the beach. (3) After learning life skills to defeat the monsters, the children and facilitators from the 3 different tribes (courage, compassion and strength) are all working together to rebuild the village destroyed by the monsters.



◀ Volunteers for Camp Simba

in Duke-NUS is even tougher. Having only one year to learn all theories and concepts in medicine and having a limited amount of time for each module has constantly kept us on our toes. As we march on, sleep deprived and anxious about each coming challenge, it's so easy to be caught up in the everyday routine of medical school and forget why we are doing all this. We are like a school of fish, swimming in the vast sea, searching for a destination we have yet to determine. It is one thing to sit through applications to determine what should be the next course of action for the patient in the case studies – but whether the actions are actually helping the patient or not is another thing. Taking part in Camp Simba was a reminder to me that I have chosen this path because I want to make a difference in someone else's life. That someday, I would be able to alleviate the pain and the weakness of the sick and I would be able to take care of the patient, not just the illness. I was not being a doctor to M, but rather a friend and an older sister, and yet I was able to touch her life in a unique way.

I spent my entire weekend at Camp Simba (even though there was a test on Monday morning!), but in return, I have gotten a wonderful experience that could never have been replicated elsewhere. The friendships that I have forged with both the Yong Loo Lin students and the participating children, especially M and J, will always be precious to me. I will always remember that being a doctor doesn't just mean curing the illness – it includes being a friend and making a difference in your patient's life in more ways than one. **SMA**



Christopher Ross Schlieve and Wu Lin Chieh are first-year students from the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. As Camp Simba facilitators, they took care of two to three children each. Camp Simba is a community service collaboration between the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, that started in 2009. Two Camps have since been held.

Lin Chieh: Sometimes, little revelations in life come when you least expect it. It was an ordinary start to a routine week at school when it dawned on me that the school holidays were over and that in a blink of an eye, four weeks had passed since the end of Camp Simba. During the camp, I was responsible for the care and safety of two girls, M and J. I started to wonder how the girls would be doing in school (J will be continuing Primary Two and M would be joining her friends back in the second year of kindergarten). Memories of when I first met them came to mind. I remembered the twinkle of mischief in their eyes, the innocent and honest smiles and the genuine laughter and realised that I missed them, despite the brief time I had spent with them.

On the following Monday after Camp Simba, during a lengthy and intense lecture, I received a call. Being the avid and conscientious student that I am, I chose to ignore it and concentrate fully on what Dr Tan was saying. However, as the caller persisted and my teammates shot looks in my direction trying to identify the source of the vibrations, I decided to pick up the call and on the other end of the line, a little voice spoke, "Hello?"

It was not what I had expected to hear and after frantically trying to identify the owner of the voice and a period of awkward silence, I replied, "Errm.. hello? Who's this?"

"I miss you."

Suddenly, it dawned on me who it was. And it was the sweetest thing I'd heard in a while. It was M, trying to reach me on her house phone. In the midst of the rapid words of Dr Tan and the flurry of typing by my classmates, I felt a warm and indescribable feeling in my heart.

"What are you doing now? Why is it so noisy?" M asked. I burst into uncontrollable laughter.

We went on to talk for a while. In her soft voice, she told me that she missed me and because of that, she made a card for me. I told her that I missed her too and started relating to her about my day and the happenings in class. Before I knew it, class had ended. As she said goodbye, I reminded her to send the card to me and that I would definitely cherish the card and put it in a very safe place.

Till now, I haven't received the card. Maybe it slipped her mind. I thought of reminding her but I figured I should let her live her life. I already felt that I was very fortunate to have been a part of her life and that she has so much to live for despite the fact she has to go through more than the average kid her age (M's mother is currently undergoing chemotherapy). M might have forgotten to send the card but I won't forget her, and I am grateful that I was able to make a difference in her life.

Being in medical school is tough. Being