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Camp Pacific Heartland brings hope

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The camp, funded through the efforts of Malibu resident David Gale, provides children living with AIDS and HIV emotional and psychological support, as well as the traditional trappings and trimmings of outdoor camping.

By Melonie Magruder / Special to The Malibu Times

The only sound you hear when you arrive at Camp Pacific Heartland in the distant hills above Malibu is one of isolation-wind through the trees.

Which is perhaps appropriate for the 100 or so young campers who come up to relax and enjoy nature, shedding the isolation they are forced to endure in their everyday lives. The children who come here have all been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS.

In 1994, MTV executive and Malibu resident David Gale founded the nonprofit organization Hollywood Heart and teamed with Neil Willenson, CEO of One Heartland, to provide opportunities for arts, recreation and, most importantly, hope for at-risk children in Southern California.

"When people hear 'camp,' they think swimming and hiking and roasting marshmallows," Willenson said. "We do all that with these kids, but we also offer important emotional and psychological support. Believe it or not, with the poverty and family dysfunction, and societal shunning these children face on a daily basis, AIDS is probably fourth or fifth on their list of things to worry about."

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, that causes the disease AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), is spread primarily through sexual activity with someone who is infected, transmission from infected mother to baby during pregnancy, or the sharing of non-sterilized needles by intravenous drug users who are infected.

Until the mid-90s, when protease-inhibiting drug protocols permitted life-saving therapies, a diagnosis of AIDS was pretty much a death sentence.

The children who arrive at Camp Pacific Heartland are mostly from poor families (the camp is funded almost entirely from private donations), frequently from single parent or foster households and many from communities in which they cannot let their HIV-status be known, for fear of public condemnation.

"Unfortunately, there's still a lot of stigma attached to the disease," Willenson said.



Malibu resident David Gale (right) teamed with Neil Willenson to offer children afflicted with HIV and AIDS a place of respite, and fun, through Camp Pacific Heartland in Malibu. Photo by Melonie Magruder / TMT

Accordingly, Camp Pacific Heartland campers enjoy archery, swimming, arts-and-crafts, outdoor talent shows and zip-line courses with their true peers, along with frank group health discussions.

"The teenagers here might lack T-cells," Willenson observed. "But they don't lack hormones. They are faced with life-altering decisions in every relationship."

This year, Hollywood Heart is offering campers a new opportunity with their Movie Team workshop, wherein the children study some aspect of movie making with industry professionals and, by the end of the week, have produced their own short film.

"You really see these kids feeling incredible accomplishment," Gale, who has steered similar programs at Hollywood Heart's sister city in Cape Town, South Africa, said.

Lisa Cavanaugh is the executive director of Hollywood Heart and an associate film producer. She said that she was surprised by some of the ideas that came from their campers.

"We thought they'd do documentaries about their lives, but they all wanted fun, fiction stuff," Cavanaugh said. "Zombies, aliens-they wanted the same kind of escape we all want from the movies."

Ian, 17, has attended the camp 10 ten years and is now a junior counselor. He wants to work in the writing workshop in next week's Arts and Movie Team camp.

"I contracted HIV when I got a blood transfusion when I was three weeks old," Ian said. "My parents didn't tell me I had it till I was seven. It got out and I suddenly became 'the AIDS boy' in my neighborhood. It was a lonely year. Then I came to camp here and everyone with HIV just acted normal."

Even though Ian is a cardiac patient who "has been hospitalized maybe a 100 times," he participates in all the outdoor activities.

"You have to know your enemy and just not get too excited," he said.

Ian's little sister, Rumor, is 10 years old and is in her fourth year at camp. She wants to be a drummer someday. Remarkably articulate, they both speak on behalf of Hollywood Heart and One Heartland at colleges, Rotary Clubs and other community venues around the country.

"I like to educate people," Rumor said. "You know, even if you have HIV, you're still normal. You just have a sickness to take care of."

Gale and Cavanaugh plumb the Hollywood community for volunteers to come visit the campers. Past entertainers who have worked at Camp Pacific Heartland include singers Lance Bass and Michelle Williams of Destiny's Child.

Last week, "That 70's Show" costar Wilmer Valderrama showed up to dance and party with Heartland campers.

"I had a blast. These children are amazing," Valderrama wrote in an e-mail message to The Malibu Times. "They're filled with hope, spirit and, most of all, courage. It's great to know that there are programs provided to these children who are in need and at times, don't have resources."

Willenson said improvements in healthcare have eased some of the ache in working with HIV and AID-afflicted children.

"We do lose some," he said. "But now we can concentrate on helping them deal with problems beyond poverty, medication protocols and stress. They shouldn't have to deal with discrimination as well."

To underscore his point, Willenson read a letter from a former camper.

"I loved Camp Heartland," it read. "When I'm at camp it is the only time I don't think about suicide or running

away."

More information about Camp Pacific Heartland can be found online at www.hollywoodheart.org

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