

A Grief Journey By: Taylor Klitzka

At 9 years old, my life changed more drastically than I could have ever imagined. When I was in 4th grade, my mom was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer, which was entirely unexpected based on her health and young age. My mom's diagnosis crushed my whole family, but we leaned on each other for support as we navigated this terrifying experience. As my mom grew sicker, I had a constant fear of losing her and how this would change my life, but it never felt possible for her to be gone. After five long years of battling cancer, my mom passed away at our home surrounded by friends and family.

By this point, I was a freshman in high school, my brother was in 6th grade, and my dad took on all the roles of parenting as a widow. My dad taught me how to drive, helped me start my first job, watched me cross the stage at graduation, and sent me off for my first day of college. Each milestone was incredibly difficult to experience without my mom there in person, and it felt particularly challenging as a teenager and young adult. I became severely depressed after my mom died, but my friends and family were constantly supporting me as I navigated the grieving process. I joined a support group at my high school for grieving students, and I also started therapy. To this day, I wish that 15-year-old me had a chance to participate in a program like Camp HOPE, but I believe that this opportunity appeared later when I needed it most.

During the summer prior to my final year of college, my dad started having some very serious health issues. For months, his doctors could not pinpoint what the issue was. My dad had been treated for melanoma a few times in the past, and little did we know that this aggressive cancer had come back again. That fall of 2018, the medical team discovered that my dad had a large mass in his intestines, and his spleen and gallbladder were also full of cancer. These tumors were removed, but I was plagued with negative thoughts and fears of losing my dad. After finishing my finals for my last semester of college, my dad agonizingly shared that his cancer had spread to his brain. Within weeks, my dad started a clinical trial



in hopes of reducing the tumors in his brain. After a month of treatments, my dad was experiencing unbearable pain, so my brothers and I brought him to the emergency department. Here, we learned that the tumors in my dad's brain had spread significantly, and his doctor made the difficult and unexpected decision to initiate hospice care. On the third day of hospice, my dad peacefully joined my mom in Heaven.

One of my professors introduced me to child life, which is a service provided in healthcare settings to children who need therapeutic interventions, procedural preparation, psychosocial support, and coping strategies for their own illnesses or support in navigating a family member's illness. The semester before my dad passed away, I felt confident that I wanted to pursue this career. One of the requirements for certification is to have volunteer hours in the hospital setting, with children in stressful situations, and with healthy children. In my search for volunteer opportunities, I came across Camp HOPE, which immediately intrigued me because of my own experiences with grief. Little did I know that this camp was going to change my life.

The first camp that I volunteered at was in the spring of 2019, which was one month before my dad died. At this point, I was worried about my dad's prognosis, but there was still hope that he would recover. However, Camp HOPE allowed me to revisit my grief from my mom's death, which I had suppressed over time. Through all the activities and moments to share my story during camp, I felt myself opening back up and reliving some of the amazing memories of my mom. There

were many tears shed, and it was an incredibly healing experience. The next camp, in the fall of 2019, was even more life changing. I was early in the grieving process for my dad, but the support of every single volunteer helped to build me back up. By the time I met my group of campers, my heart was already so full. I can't even begin to explain how healing Camp HOPE is for me, but it comes down to the profound empathy that everyone has for each other. Just being in the same room with these volunteers and campers is transformative because we all understand how unbearable grief can feel at some point in our lives. During my third session volunteering at Camp HOPE, it was the reunion camp, which holds an even greater meaning. Here, the campers and volunteers were able to reconnect and build even closer bonds. It was amazing to see how much the campers had grown already and to see how excited they were to come back for reunion camp.



Through the good and the bad days, I have persevered through my journey with grief to reach the point where I am at today. I look forward to these weekends at Camp HOPE more than anything because of the amazing volunteers, incredible campers, and wonderful experience as a whole. There is never a dull moment at camp, whether that means a snowball fight, laughing so hard that we cry, or eating too many cookies. For anyone in the process of navigating their grief, Camp HOPE will be a safe, inclusive place for you. I can confidently say that volunteering with Camp HOPE has helped me navigate my own grief, and I have seen first-hand how powerful this weekend is for the campers too.



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*A camp experience for
children and their
families after the death
of a loved one*

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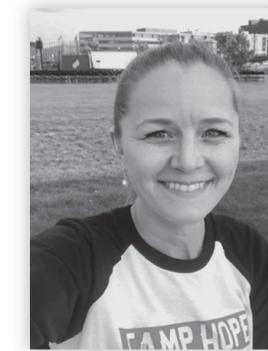
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A Free Weekend Bereavement Camp



loved one." I then pause and scan for eye contact and body language again. I wait to see if they're interested or anxious.

I'm really not sure why death ever became a taboo topic. Everyone experiences death and grief at some point in their lives and although losing someone we love is not a positive experience, sometimes the support, companionship and establishment of new friendships following the loss is extremely powerful, healing and uplifting.

"Camp HOPE is a safe space for campers to have fun and laugh. They also learn that doing so is not disrespectful to their loved one who passed away. We incorporate many of the fun activities

"Camp HOPE... so what's that?" Whenever I get this question, I quickly scan for eye contact and body language. I determine if the person is just being polite and making small talk or if they genuinely want to listen. I typically start by explaining, "Camp HOPE is a free weekend bereavement camp for grieving children, teens and families who have experienced the death of a family member, friend or loved one."

of a typical summer camp, such as hiking, fishing, arts and crafts, folk music, campfires, wall climbing, and teambuilding, but we also make time to allow for sharing memories of our loved ones, a candlelight memorial, coping skills and memory crafts."

It's amazing how much sharing initiated by the campers occurs, just because we set the environment letting them know that these conversations are ok and welcomed. Sometimes camper groups will even pass on the opportunity to go boating or do another activity, because they'd rather find a comfortable space to just sit and talk and share. At Camp HOPE, campers are able to open up about their grief and not feel judged or obligated to assess how their audience is feeling as they talk about the death of their loved one. They don't feel the need to scan for the eye contact or body language of others. They don't need to seek permission to continue or watch for a cue to stop because the conversation is too taboo. Each camper comes as they are and says what they feel and at Camp HOPE, that's just perfect! How beautiful our world would be if everyone felt so safe to be who they truly are and fully express themselves without judgement.

No matter what the response is to my explanation of Camp HOPE, I am always sure to include that, "At Camp HOPE, campers are respected, valued, and affirmed, inclusive of who they are as individuals and of their unique grief experience."

Vicky Wittman, Director, Camp HOPE

Camp HOPE Experience

By: Amber Wisnicky-Schultz

September 20, 2015 was the day our lives were completely turned upside down. My husband Matt and I were planning to spend the afternoon at the Packers home opener. As an avid hunter, he left early that morning to put out apples for the deer and run a few more errands before returning home. Unfortunately, he never returned. Hours after leaving, we found him in a farm field, apples still in the bucket next to him. He was rushed to a local hospital where he was pronounced dead. Later that evening, the coroner called to inform me they found multiple blood clots in his brain which may have developed days, weeks or even months earlier. Ultimately, a weakened artery in his brain had torn resulting in a brain bleed and that is what took him from this world.

Over the next few months, I devoted my time figuring out how to be a single mom; raising our 4 year old daughter, Madison, and 17 month old son, Bodie. My days were filled with daycare drop off and pickup, working full time during the day, and kids activities at night. I was determined to give my kids every opportunity their peers had, despite only having one living parent.

What I didn't realize is during this time, I was going through the motions of our daily routine, just trying to get by. Madison was growing up faster than a typical 4 year old should, as she was now helping her brother with our morning routine and responsible for watching him while I completed household tasks in the evening. Before bed each night, we would try to talk about her dad to keep his memory alive. With us both being exhausted, the conversation usually consisted of "I miss dad. I wish he was here!" Me too!

One of the biggest struggles during this time was finding anyone who truly understood what we were going through. We had an amazing support system who was there for the tough times; helping out with daily tasks, and lending an ear when needed. I researched our local grieving groups hoping to find something, but my kids were too young to attend family groups and most of the adult groups consisted of

members from my grandparent's generation.

As we approached my husband's one year death anniversary, someone told me about Camp HOPE. The fall camp was taking place the weekend after my daughter's 5th birthday and I realized now might be our opportunity!

Upon arriving at Camp HOPE that morning, I was filled with emotion. Leaving my now 2 year old son home for the weekend with grandparents and allowing complete strangers to care for my 5 year old was more anxiety than I could have imagined. We were initially greeted by the therapy dogs on our walk to the dining hall, and as soon as we walked in the main doors the energy and excitement we felt was incredible! Within the first few moments, I knew we were right where we needed to be and I did not have to worry about a thing!

Throughout the weekend, I partook in a wonderful mix of physical, emotional and mental challenges, along with some pampering and self care. I finally had the chance to meet other parents who were going through similar situations and hearing their stories taught me that I was not alone in this world. The beauty of this group was also learning from others. Some of the adult campers had already celebrated multiple death anniversaries, which gave me hope for the future that you can move forward and find happiness! Others had just recently lost their loved one. Hearing their story helped me to realize how far I had come and how many battles I had already overcome in the last year. Overnight, these people became "my people" that I had been searching for over the last year.

Throughout the weekend I also had opportunities to touch base with Madison. The glow on her face told me she was finally able to "just be a kid" and was having a blast! Her camp counselor was amazing and kept me up to date on all the activities she was doing and some of the memories she was sharing about her dad. I was surprised to hear some of the stories she had shared, as I was worried with her being so young, she may have forgotten. But, it filled my heart hearing that she still remembered some special memories.

After a short, exhausting but fulfilling weekend, Madison and I were reconnected at closing ceremony. Walking back to the car, I asked her how she was feeling. She quickly

responded telling me how much fun her weekend was and how much she was looking forward to the February reunion camp!

Both Madison and I attended the reunion camp. It was wonderful to regroup with most of the families we had met in fall, along with some families who had attended the spring camp.

Following our camp experiences, both Madison and I had learned how to communicate better with each other, and become more of a team while working through our grief. Conversations about her dad went deeper than "missing him" and working through our emotions to find the root cause of them became easier.

Social networking allowed us to keep in contact with the families we had met during camp, which helped us from feeling alone in the world. We still struggled with daily challenges and the days when all the emotions of missing Matt would hit us from nowhere. But, over time, they became easier to navigate through.

In February of 2017, I had the opportunity to return to camp as a counselor with all intentions of giving back to an incredible organization. After my first camp, I learned attending camp as a counselor was equally as therapeutic as being a camper. Working with kids as young as 5 up to age 17 changed my perspective of what my kids were dealing with and offered me new ways to help them. Camp was quickly becoming the family that I never expected to have in life.

With each camp I attend, Madison asks me when she can return. I always tell her, when she is old enough to be a junior counselor; I would love to bring her with me.

Recently, I asked her what it is about Camp HOPE that she misses. It has been 5 years since she attended and I wasn't sure how much she remembers, but understand she has a strong connection to it. She told me she remembers having a lot of fun but specifically having her own cubby in the cabins, playing games with other kids her age, the hayride in fall, sledding down the big hill and cross-country skiing in the winter, and lots of arts & crafts. I was surprised when she mentioned that she remembers talking about her dad a lot and other kids talking about who they miss. But she notes her biggest connection to Camp HOPE is that it was something that she and I experienced together, just the two of us, during a time when she didn't get much one-on-one time!

Camp HOPE was a blessing during the toughest part of my life. The experiences and life lessons have created a healthier and deeper relationship between myself and my kids, and I will forever be thankful for this organization!

In Appreciation...

Many of the gifts received were given in tribute and recognition of special individuals.

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Vicki Anderson, Stevens Point, in memory of Fidel Asuquo
Vicki & Matt Beglinger, Mount Horeb, in memory of Kit Thompson
Vicky Wittman, Appleton, in memory of Joe Steffens
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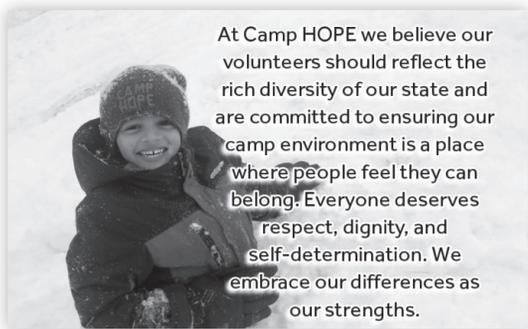
A heartfelt thank you to all of our anonymous donors.

Building a More Equitable and Inclusive Camp

By: Vicky Wittman, Kristi Anderson, Maria Loy, Lilia Figueroa & Alexis Dean

For over 32 years, Camp HOPE has always strived to provide an environment that is welcoming for all. Over the past year, we've brought this initiative to the forefront and made it a top priority, where it belongs. Our board of directors unanimously agreed and shortly after, the Camp HOPE Equity Committee was established; committee members include: Kristi Anderson, Alexis Dean, Maria Loy, Lilia Figueroa, Vicky Wittman, and Becky Loy. All committee members came together with a diverse range of skills, life experiences, cultural identities, and a mutual love for Camp HOPE. Here are a few updates from the members on the important work being accomplished.

KRISTI: The Policy Subcommittee included Kristi Anderson, Vicky Wittman, and Becky Kraemer Loy. As a team their focus has been on completing an equity review and update of internal policies and materials to ensure alignment with the Camp Hope Equity Statement. Internal Camp policies set the foundation for organizational practices



At Camp HOPE we believe our volunteers should reflect the rich diversity of our state and are committed to ensuring our camp environment is a place where people feel they can belong. Everyone deserves respect, dignity, and self-determination. We embrace our differences as our strengths.

and are one mechanism staff and board members use to hold themselves accountable to a shared commitment to this vision. All updated Camp policies can be found in our staff handbook which is reviewed by all incoming volunteers as part of our on-boarding process. This group also proposed reflection questions the board and staff can use when navigating difficult decisions or exploring new programming/partnership opportunities to explicitly center equity in decision making.

MARIA: The Gender Inclusivity Subcommittee included Maria Loy, Hannah Kane, and Emily McClain. As a team their focus has been on three major areas: the forms we use (camper/volunteer registration forms and the medical paperwork), decentering gender from some of the activities, and bathroom safety. All of our forms are now updated with gender inclusive language as well as an opportunity for staff and campers to ask for an all gender cabin arraignment. Camp is still a work in process when it comes to our activities. The team gave us some ideas and we cannot wait to try them out the next time we are all in person at Camp! Unfortunately, because we rent our space, we are unable to change the layout of the gendered bathrooms. For right now, we will make sure our staff understands that everyone is allowed to use the bathroom where they feel most comfortable.

LILIA: The Staff Training Subcommittee included Elliott Van Dyke and Lilia Figueroa. As a team their focus has been on creating a staff training through an equity lens in order to provide an environment where every camper at Camp HOPE has the best possible experience and to unite our volunteers with a shared mission. The training has three areas of focus: Equity, Language, and Privilege. Some objectives of this training will be to understand common vocabulary surrounding equity

topics, discovering implicit biases that exist in our lives, and differentiate between appropriate language and microaggressions. This group also incorporated resources for staff to continue their learning after participating in the training.

ALEXIS: The Camp Activities Subcommittee included Alexis Dean, Maria Loy, Chae Miller-Watson, Cyndi Hovland, Donna Anderson and Rob Graziano. As a team their focus has been on reviewing the weekend programming, activities, schedule, reading materials, and contracted service provider staff to ensure the programs are inclusive to all campers and volunteers as well as offered by activity leaders of diverse backgrounds. Outdated materials have been discarded and new books have been purchased to represent diverse cultures and offer more inclusivity. Camp is also contracting with BIPOC owned businesses to ensure a more diverse staff are leading activities such as yoga, mindfulness, storytelling and drumming.

We are grateful for this opportunity to better serve our communities and Camp HOPE families.

