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Camp Celebrates Ten Years of Touching Lives, Hearts

By Lucy Amaral



On the surface, Camp Kesem has all the trappings of a great summer camp - arts and crafts, sports, skits, and talent shows. And, for the most part, it is. But look a little deeper and you will see that this camp is much more than cabins, hikes and lanyards. Camp Kesem is a week-long summer camp specifically designed for kids whose parents have or had cancer.

"The lives of children of cancer patients are turned upside down when the joys of childhood are replaced with fears of losing a parent," said Iris Rave, Lafayette resident and founder of Camp Kesem. "At Camp Kesem, they are surrounded by peers who are facing similar challenges and for many, it's the only place where they have friends who truly understand what they are going through. Kids leave the camp with the strength, hope, friendships and support they need to overcome the challenges they face at home."

Headquartered in Lafayette, the Camp Kesem organization is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. This nationwide, college-student run nonprofit organization currently offers fee-free week-long camps to kids at 22 universities and colleges across the country. Locally, Camp Kesem programs are held through UC Berkeley, UC Davis, and Stanford. Camp dates for 2010 range from June to August

Camp Kesem group last summer Photo provided

depending on the site.

The idea was conceived in 2000 by Rave who, at that time, was a staff member working with Hillel (a Jewish campus organization) at Stanford.

"I was hired to engage students and empower them to develop leadership skills and give back to the community," Rave said. "I had experience working with summer camps and saw how they can impact kids in a powerful, positive way. I saw a camp like that as a great large-scale community project for students on campus."

Rave recruited four Stanford student-leaders to participate. After speaking with various doctors and camp directors, they discovered that children whose parents have cancer were largely under served. With this as their target, the student leaders began to coordinate the first camp, choosing the word 'kesem' (Hebrew for Magic) as the name of the camp. In 2001, the first camp hosted 37 kids on the Stanford campus. In 2002, Rave founded Camp Kesem National as an independent, nationwide nonprofit to help colleges across the country start their own program. By 2009, more than 1,000 kids and nearly 1,000 student volunteers on 22 campuses participated in the program around the country.

The camp is open to student-leaders and campers of any religion and Rave said that the organization's goal is two-fold: Offer a camp that serves these children, and create a platform where college students could develop leadership skills that would translate into real world abilities.

"You cannot underestimate how amazing these college students are," said Sarah Blumenfeld, development director for Camp Kesem. "They have incredible demands yet they commit themselves to this program. They are leading and running their own nonprofit on a local level." The organization currently has two paid program directors who oversee the on-campus programs to ensure continuity and quality.

As with any nonprofit, fundraising is a constant. Camp Kesem has recently been awarded \$25,000 from Chase Community Giving through Facebook voting. The organization is now in the running for a \$1 million grant through Chase, again with the winner being chosen by the number of Facebook votes.

"We would like to launch 100 more camps in the next three years," said Blumenfeld. "This grant will allow us to bring in more program directors, so we can responsibly and physically manage more camps."

Regardless of that outcome, Camp Kesem will celebrate the ten years of accomplishments it has already achieved. And, in keeping with its audience, the celebration will be a good old-fashioned birthday party, with a birthday cake, an oversized birthday card, and a whimsical photo-op with very large cutout caterpillar (the organization's logo). The party, to be held February 27th during Camp Kesem's annual National Student Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, will include founding students, camp alumni as well as current student-leaders, and volunteers.

While Rave's ultimate hope is that eventually there won't be a need for Camp Kesem, her goal is for the camp to simply continue. "I hope it will continue to thrive for many years to come," she said. "And, ultimately, every child who has a parent with cancer has a chance to attend a Camp Kesem."

For more information check the Camp's website

www.campkesem.org.

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