Elliott Workman
Service Project
17 July 2007

Challenge Aspen
Music & Dance Camp, July 9-13, 2007
The Jungle Book

I began to attend summer day camps at age 6 and was enrolled in a variety of camps for the next eight years. Many were local, and some were in other states. When I became 15, I was old enough to work as a "counselor" at a local day camp. This summer was my third opportunity to work at a sports day camp with young boys (ages 6-9), and I love being a counselor as much as I used to love being a camper.

This was also my third summer to be accepted as a counselor/"buddy" at the most meaningful and emotional camp I have experienced ~ *Challenge Aspen*, in Colorado, where for eleven years their motto has been *Making possibilities for people with disabilities.*

Because this is a music camp for physically and mentally disabled people, the differences between this camp and a "normal" summer camp are dramatic: Age and gender do not matter; talent, or lack of, does not matter; ability to remember lines or small dance steps does not matter; level of mobility does not matter; limited verbal skill does not matter. All that matters is that each camper goes through the day feeling good about what he did, and feels that he belongs there as much as anyone else does. A smile from a camper speaks volumes about his true feelings.

As a "buddy," I was assigned to one participant with whom I would bond ~ by shadowing his every move, but not moving for him; by waiting patiently for him to finish sentences instead of completely them for him; by whispering his lines when he needed help, but not saying them in his place; by reassuring him (approx. every 10 minutes) that I would help him find the "treasure" (his personal obsession); by repeatedly showing him how to put the paint on the set, but not painting it for him; and by calmly answering the same questions, over and over, throughout the day.

At other camps where I have been a counselor, it is important to be participatory and responsible ~ a role model that the boys can like and respect. At *Challenge Aspen*, a "buddy" must also add another dimension of energy and thought to every minute because each camper's diagnosis comes with its own

set of diverse ~ and often severe ~ conditions. A "buddy" has to be part motivational speaker and part cheerleader ~ one who encourages and inspires his camper to try things that society as a whole has said he can<u>not</u> do. And when he tries it ~ no matter how meager or brief his effort or successes ~ revel with him in his new-found confidence. Watching the smile that emerges from an otherwise closed face is heart-warming beyond description.

I was asked to "buddy" the same child that I have had for the past two years, an amiable eight-year-old named Connor. Connor was diagnosed with Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder characterized by mild to moderate mental retardation or learning difficulties, a distinctive facial appearance, and a unique personality that combines overfriendliness and high levels of anxiety. He is a difficult but loving child who has made my life more meaningful each summer. This camp has given Connor and all other participants a week where their special needs are transformed into special abilities. This year's play was *The Jungle Book*, and the participants rehearsed diligently for the show.

Every day, after a few hours of rehearsal, there was a field trip. We went to a horse ranch, a gym, and white water rafting. At the ranch, all the campers were taught western dances; even the immobile kids were included and had a great time. At the gym, all the campers had lots of laughs jumping on trampolines, swinging from bars, and just watching everyone else have a good time. The last field trip, white-water rafting, was not only fun but memorable. In the past, Connor has had an enormous fear of being in a river or lake and I thought that this time would be no different. Although hesitant at first, once Connor witnessed the excitement of his friends, he grabbed me and began to pull me to the raft. Connor was either smiling or laughing as the rafts made their way downriver, and he was delighted when a passing camper-raft directed all of their water-gun power at me and I was drenched! In fact, the laughter throughout the rafting afternoon by all the campers was almost non-stop. Connor and other campers showed me that people with disabilities, whether physical or mental, can have just as much fun as "normal" people. Knowing I was part of his happiness gave me a kind of satisfaction that comes only from knowing that your actions have made someone's day better.

Perhaps the most meaningful event of the week occurred on the last day when the play was performed. Each year, despite the limited rehearsals, and minimal costumes and sets, everything comes together. Watching from the side felt the same as having front row seats to a Broadway production. I was surprised at the reason for enjoying the play so much: it was not because of the quality (obviously, it was not like a professional play) but because all the campers were having so much fun performing, singing, and dancing. It was watching their excitement and pride, and the pride of their families in the audience, that really made me feel that I had done something meaningful.

The *Challenge Aspen* camp provides a rewarding atmosphere, not only for the participants, but for the buddies as well. Working with Connor has shown me that, in many ways, he and the other campers are not so different from "normal" people. Yes, they have more challenges and limitations. But they are capable of expressing love and gratitude, accomplishing short term goals,

bravely trying new (& sometimes difficult or scary) activities, understanding positive consequences, showing compassion, support and encouragement to fellow campers, and feeling happy just to be with their friends. In their eyes, everyone was a winner just for trying. Absent from their daily attitude was anger, jealousy, cynicism, competitiveness, impatience, and selfishness. Perhaps these campers are truly "special" because, through them, we see the qualities that elude we "normal" people almost daily.

When I think I have it tough, I hope I can remember Conner, and Max, and Barrett, and Will, and Blake, and Joe, and all the other campers who, by sharing themselves with me, have shown me that *believing in* possibilities, whether for oneself or a friend, is how wishes become realities.

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