

Burn survivors find courage at camp



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The ages from seven to 17 can be difficult for anyone. Puberty, bullying and not quite being sure of who they are and what they want to do in life can be stressful for many young people. For those who have survived burns, there's often additional challenges to overcome.

Many young burn survivors try to hide their scars, some refusing to go out in public due to the fear and stigma surrounding how they look. This is where Camp Bucko steps in and helps.

Camp Bucko is also known as Burn Camp for Kids in Ontario and has been operating for 24 years. They serve burn survivors from ages seven to 17. Many of the campers are recommended through the burn unit of Ontario's three top burn hospitals, CHEO, Toronto Sick Kids Hospital and London Health Sciences. When nurses and health teams believe a patient would benefit from being part of Camp Bucko, the child and family receive a package that includes a teddy bear with a Camp Bucko T-shirt on it for the child, some information pamphlets for parents, a postcard and contact information if the child is interested in going to Camp Bucko.

But that is not the only way young burn survivors can become a part of Camp Bucko. Families interested in having their child attend are welcome to visit the camp's website at www.campbucko.ca to find more information on how to become a part of the Camp Bucko Family. Camp Bucko's board of directors member Patrick Howlett, says that they never turn a burn survivor away and they would be more than happy to talk with anyone interested in becoming part of Camp Bucko.

One of the issues that Camp Bucko works on is filling the gap between the child's time in the hospital and the real world. Often once the youth is released from hospital their health services end and families have to learn to move on through the issues that sometimes follow. Many burn survivors do not feel like they could ever live a normal life again due to stigma, bullying and sometimes being ashamed of how their body or face looks.

Camp Bucko is a place where the burn survivors stop being burn survivors, in a way, and can just be kids again. Out on the lake with other youth who have similar stories, the youth find understanding and acceptance.

Camp Bucko is a not-for-profit organization run by a board of directors and volunteers, many of whom have seen what burn trauma can do to a child first-hand either as a firefighter or health care provider. For the past four years Camp Bucko has found a permanent home at Cedar Ridge Camp in Carlow/Mayo Township.

Camp Bucko rents out Cedar Ridge Camp for one week in August for just the burn survivors, and one weekend in September for burn survivors and their families. Each event is a fun experience for all involved and it creates a bond between campers and the families who get the chance to share experiences and learn new strategies to help the youth.

The main goal of the camp is to give the children freedom and a chance to share their stories. They also build self esteem and learn how to cope with life beyond their burn injury and scars. Youth have a fun-filled outdoor adventure in a place that gives the campers

a chance to learn about themselves and discover their strengths, skills and abilities.

The camp introduces them to adult burn survivors who are the camp's volunteers and camp counsellors. These adults were often campers once themselves and they give back to the camp every year. Many of the youth are amazed when they see that so many other youth and even adults have burns and scars similar to their own.

Many of the campers can't wait to return to Camp Bucko year after year and plan to come back as a counsellor-in-training and then at 18 years old they have the opportunity to come back as a camp counsellor and help the next group of young burn survivors experience the camp.

Camper Carley says that she likes Camp Bucko and plans to come back as a counsellor-in-training when she is old enough because, "Camp Bucko taught me that I am not the only one who is burnt in the world and I get that there are a lot of us who experience the same things. I like it here because I get to see my friends here and I don't have to hide my burns. My favourite activities at camp are horseback riding and the high ropes climbing."

Camp Bucko campers participate in every activity that Cedar Ridge Camp has to offer from horseback riding to hiking, canoeing, fishing, archery, crafts and much more. The senior campers even participate in a beginners level white water rafting course in Palmer Rapids.

Senior camper Zander explains that the camp is like a family and says, "I'm not happy I got burnt, but I am happy that it happened when I was young so I could experience the full camp and learn more about myself and others like me. I plan to come back and become a counsellor too."

Anyone interested in becoming a part of Camp Bucko or knows a youth who may find the courage to be themselves by attending camp are welcome to contact the camp at www.campbucko.ca. While this year's week long camp, which ran from Monday, Aug. 12 to Friday, Aug. 16, is over, there is still room in the family weekend in September. Plans are already underway for next year as the camp will be celebrating its 25th anniversary and they are looking for ways to make it the best year yet.