

Letter from the Editor: Daring to Care

By: Mary Maguire Armstrong

While most of my class was partying in Rome, eating great food and waiting for a consistently inconsistent bus, I was eating, sleeping, showering, and going about all my other daily activities in Richardton-Taylor High School. I was also singing old Sunday School songs like, "This Little Light of Mine," or "Jesus Loves Me," trying to polka, playing "Duck, Duck, Goose" and loving every second of it. Granted, juvenile games aren't how I normally have a good time, but I wasn't playing them for my own enjoyment. I played them for Dawn, Timmy, Bruce, Amber, Jenny and the other campers at Camp ReCreation who had come to Richardton for a week created to give them a break from their routine, a chance to make friends, and to give them the time of their lives. The campers at Camp ReCreation are mentally handicapped. For two weeks in June, campers from North Dakota and the surrounding area come for a weeklong session, year after year. There are campers who have been attending for longer than most the counselors have been alive. But, it's not only campers who keep coming back; the same counselors show up every year too, usually dragging a friend or two along. "Dragging" is an accurate word in most cases. The pitch might not sound very appealing; "You go for the first week, or the second week, or both. You'll be responsible for a camper, maybe two, who, depending on their disabilities, will need help bathing, dressing, and maybe using the restroom. About three days into it, and you'll be exhausted. You'll sing, dance, and never want to leave."

That last part might not seem convincing, but it's the absolute truth. Every year, I've left so tired I'm ready to hibernate, and deliriously happy. And that's the rule, not the exception. Somewhere, in all the games, songs and responsibility, is a whole lot of love and joy that makes Woodstock seem comparatively gloomy.

Four years ago, I'd heard about Camp and decided to give it a shot. The first day was filled with going over procedures, rules, and a chance to get to know the other volunteers. I knew no one else ahead of time, which was unnerving enough; add that to an afternoon of hearing instructions about what to do if someone had a seizure, or how to lift someone from a wheelchair, and I was terrified. The following morning, I was waiting nervously for my camper to arrive as the returning counselors eagerly stood by the door and enthusiastically greeted everyone by name. One hour into everything starting, my fears had almost completely dissolved after being hugged repeatedly with the exclamation, "It's so good to see you again! I missed you!" They didn't know me, but they didn't care. I was there; that's what mattered.

Fast-forward four years, and Camp is the highlight of my summer, every summer. It's not been easy; I've had stubborn campers, stressful responsibilities, and, as of this past June, been thrown up on. But I've also been loved with simple, unadulterated love that I did nothing to earn. I've laughed so hard I cried when asking a camper if they wanted to go to the bathroom and being informed, "I'd rather go to Jamaica." I learned very quickly that I couldn't do everything on my own, but there are plenty of people around that were more than willing to lend a helping hand. The friendships I've formed at Camp are unlike

any others, because of the unique situation they're formed in. Instead of slowly getting to know each other, we're thrown into a week of being around each other 24/7, and we rely on each other to get things done. Complete strangers on day one are close and lifelong friends by day five.

It's not only been the counselors and volunteers that have become friends, however. I recently received a postcard from one of my former campers. It was a simple note: "I miss you and love you and will see you next summer!" But the complete sincerity with which it was written made me feel completely unworthy to be the recipient of that sort of love. The campers are appreciating the smallest thing; a smile or a hug means the world to them. They just want to enjoy life with the people who are around them.

I've put a lot of work and time into Camp ReCreation. But, I've given comparatively little for what I've gotten. What I initially thought was something that would look good on an application for a college or a job has changed my life. It seems almost deceitful to write them up as volunteer hours because of how thoroughly it is. I've convinced as many of my friends as possible to give it a shot, and ever one of them has come away with similar sentiments. It's not easy, but it's worth it a thousand times over. The slogan of Camp ReCreation is a challenge that is almost frightening, but is one that I've learned applies to all of life, and that is richly rewarded when embraced enthusiastically; "Dare to Care."