

As the Summer of 2009 Comes To An End ...

by Emma Jackson, Director, Autism Ontario York Region Kids Camp

As the summer of 2009 comes to an end, I look back fondly on my past summers at A-OK Camp. I knew when I started the job in 2003 how greatly the programme had affected my family, since my younger brother had attended since he was young. I jumped into the job whole-heartedly and became attached to the children and staff immediately.

Our one-of-a-kind Camp provides a wonderful summer experience for children who otherwise might not have one. Most typical day camps simply do not fit their needs, including the need for daily community outings. Watching the Camp grow over the last six summers has been amazing, as the number of families involved has increased tremendously.

In past summers, I have watched campers "graduate" from the programme at 21 years old and not know what they did over the following summers! With the addition of the *Autism Ontario Adult programme (AOA)*, we now offer families the chance to extend their child's amazing A-OK Camp experience into their adult years.

After six summers, I can now say that I have experienced work at every level that Camp provides: Counsellor- In- Training (C.I.T), Counsellor, Senior Counsellor (two summers), Assistant Director and this summer, Director. I feel that I am able to provide a perspective for staff and families because I represent both sides. Now, maybe I am biased, but this summer's staff has

been exceptional, energetic and extremely capable, which makes my job a lot easier.

On behalf of Mike Freeman, Director of the *Autism Ontario Adult programme*, and Kristin Brewer, Director of the *Autism Ontario/ Kerry's Place Autism Services (AO/KPAS) Youth programme*, thank you to the wonderful team of staff, the A-OK Camp Committee, high school volunteers and families of A-OK, AOA and AO/KPAS campers for a wonderful summer! ♥



The Natural: A Counsellor's Story

... BY CRYSTAL TANCREDI

Although just 16, Brittney is already a seasoned Camp worker. At the tender age of 11, she began her association with A-OK Camp; this year, she joins the ranks of our regular paid staff. Welcome aboard, Brittney!

Brittney began volunteering with us at the suggestion of our Camp Committee's own Debora Manni, who is also a special needs teacher. At the time, Debora counted Brittney's brother, Jordan, among the students in her

community class. Debora thought it would be a positive experience for Brittney to volunteer; given that A-OK Camp was then an unknown to them, Brittney's family liked the idea of a family member at Camp to observe the care provided to their non-verbal child.

The rest, as they say, is history. Both Brittney and Jordan have flourished at Camp, becoming yet another family woven tightly into the fabric of summers at A-OK.

In fact, Brittney enjoyed Camp so much that she has continued to work with us every summer, rising through the ranks from volunteer, to Counsellor-In- Training, and finally, to Counsellor.

Being full-fledged - "an actual, 'I-have-my-own-camper' Counsellor" - makes this a particularly exciting summer for her. And with her new position come both trials and rewards, sometimes at the



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About Autism Ontario

Originally incorporated in 1973 as *The Ontario Society for Autistic Children*, we later became *Autism Society Ontario*, and, in 2006, *Autism Ontario*.

*Our Vision:
Acceptance and
opportunities for all
individuals with
Autism Spectrum
Disorders.*

*Our Mission:
To ensure that each
individual with ASD is
provided the means to
achieve quality of life as
a respected member of
society.*

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The Natural: A Counsellor's Story

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same moment. She relates a story: One of the campers in her charge was "having a bad day". Even as she doggedly tried to comfort him, he persisted in acting out aggressively. The stalemate ended when he suddenly stopped and gave her a kiss and a hug, very unusual behaviour for him. She was elated by this new, positive behaviour, and couldn't wait to share it with his parents.

As the sibling of a person living with ASD, she can definitely relate: Parents are accustomed to constant reports of their child's problem behaviour; but she was able to deliver unexpectedly "good news" to a weary parent "who beamed". And that sort of experience makes the work very rewarding.

Brittney's volunteer efforts do not end with the summer months: She has also found time to volunteer at charity events for cancer research, and the Children's Aid Society, as well as a downtown shelter.

There is still time to try on possible future careers; she is currently considering psychology, law and journalism.

Brittney looks forward to a long relationship with A-OK Camp: "Camp gave me patience and understanding. If I see someone with special needs in the mall, I don't gawk – I know it's not helpful. Camp has taught me so much. They say you need to be a special kind of person to work here, but they reward us every day." ♥



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