



True Survivors

A FIXTURE ACROSS NORTH AMERICA, BURN CAMPS HAVE GIVEN HOPE AND A HUGE AMOUNT OF ENJOYMENT TO THOUSANDS OF BURN SURVIVORS OF ALL AGES. JJ WORRALL SPEAKS TO BRAD WIGGINS, DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH'S BURN CAMP ON HOW THEY CAN HELP SURVIVORS AND WHY SUCH A CAMP COULD BE A WELCOME ADDITION IN IRELAND.

The University of Utah's Intermountain Burn Centre's Burn Camp is recognised as one of the finest camps of its kind in North America, offering adventure, fun, camaraderie and much more holistic benefits into the bargain. The University Health Care Burn Camp Programmes were established in 1993 to support burn patients with the personal challenges associated with surviving a burn accident.

Director of the Burn Camp in Utah, Brad Wiggins, says that the key to the success of their operation is that whether the camp is for younger or older burn survivors (attendees are placed in camps specific programmes based on age, and social needs), they try to pick activities that are going to build self-esteem and which can provide team building opportunities.

He reveals that many burn survivors don't feel they will ever recover from their injuries. "They believe that they'll never be able to do the things they did before," he adds. "I think Burn Camp teaches them how to gain acceptance, understand their injury, find friendship with people who have similar injuries and, eventually, move forward and begin the healing process."

CAMP NAH-NAH-MAH

A clinical nurse co-ordinator, Wiggins has been working on the post-treatment side of recovering

burn patients for nearly two decades. Having started his career working as a counsellor on river rafting trips for adolescents, Wiggins, along with Salt Lake City Fire Department Battalion Chief Ron Fife, launched Camp Nah-Nah-Mah, a camp programme aimed at six to 12-year-old burn survivors.

Fife's work helping children recover from the trauma associated with their burn injuries goes back nearly 20 years as well, and he recently commented that he was extremely proud of "the high level of personal involvement of Utah firefighters in creating a comfortable, supportive and fun place for these young survivors to spend time in the summer".

Camp Nah-Nah-Mah runs alongside two other camps. The adult burn camp allows survivors to get away from it all and spend a six-day river rafting trip with a spouse, family member or loved one who also experienced their burn injury, while for 13- to 17-year-olds there is a similar once-in-a-lifetime river rafting expedition.

Free of charge to youths who attend, it is an effort funded by the Professional Firefighters of Utah, who take part in fundraising activities throughout the year. All of those who attend the camp were one-time patients at the University of Utah Hospital's regional burn unit, which is responsible for the biggest geographic region of any such unit in the United States.

VERY CHALLENGING

When talking to *Firecall*, Wiggins is keen to point out that one part of the terminology they use at the Burn Camp – burns survivor – is paramount to hammer home to those attending that they are indeed survivors, before any of the activities take place. “We work very hard to call the people here ‘survivors’, the terminology of the victim is someone who has been victimised, and that’s not to say they’re not victims of an accident but we really work hard to make them burns survivors. We want to teach them that they have raised themselves up and out of a situation that’s very difficult, very challenging and to become a survivor means a lot of things.”

Firstly, he explains, it means acceptance of your injury, secondly it means that you’re not going to let your burn injury hold you back from attempting to move on with your life, and finally that you have “truly moved on to a place of peace with what’s happened to you”.

Every burn camp is a little different, says Wiggins. Most camp programmes in North America (there are

about 50 in total) conform to the typical, standard notion of the American camping experience that we will all be familiar with through TV shows or movies. There are cabins, there’s canoeing, there’s archery and plenty of wildlife activities.

“I run one of the more unusual ones in that sense, and people seem to love it so far,” laughs Wiggins, “One of the camps, which we started 17 years ago is a six-day river raft trip, so we go white-water rafting for six days in the middle of the Utah wilderness where’s there’s no phone, no roads, no cars. You’re very ‘out there’.”

While all are different, the focus of all burn camp programmes is “to build self-esteem and to build camaraderie with other burns survivors”, notes Wiggins. “If you’re a burns survivor walking down the street then you just don’t see many other burn survivors. They’re out there but the numbers are relatively small in comparison to someone with cancer, someone who’s been in a car accident. The support network isn’t necessarily as obvious as with other conditions.”





PARENTAL SUPPORT

Wiggins points out that it’s often a difficult process for parents to let go of their children when they come to camps such as his. Mentioning that he’d find the prospect of letting his five or ten-year-old children go to camp with people he doesn’t know that well as “scary to me anyway”. However, the camp’s association with the University Health Care Burn Centre usually helps with such fears for parents of survivors.

“It’s a difficult thing for parents to let go of their kids for a few nights but really what it’s about is the parents have a trust in the Burn Centre because we helped to save their child’s life. That’s the first thing, that’s how trust gets built. The parents generally don’t want to let their kids

CAMP STAFF

The type of staff at the burn camps vary, with Wiggins saying medical professionals, counsellors, psychologists and a great number of firefighters often make their way into his team. “Each camp has varying demands of course, depending on the amount of kids you have, which can be anything from ten to a hundred. Primarily though, counselling staff will be made up of firefighters, adult burn survivors, and any type of volunteer interested in the programme with relevant training.

“The training of staff is probably one of the places where the majority of my time goes. Certainly with many burn camps, a lot of staff will come from your local burn centre. It’s where the patients have been treated and they

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out of sight, even more so than other parents. They can be very clingy to a child after injury, they can over-bearing with rules and have a tendency to not let their kid live their lives in case anything happens to them.

“So, we actually have a parents support group at our four-day camp for little kids (Camp Nah-Nah-Mah), and on the day they come and pick up their kids we get all the parents together for a couple of hours. We usually have a social worker talk with the parents to process what they’ve experienced, and it can be quite a rollercoaster ride for many. Most parents end up recovering quite well but entire families are impacted by an incident that leaves a child with burn injuries. Some camps in the US actually have family camp programmes.”

know how to care for them the best, but a very common tie-in is actually the firefighters. They know that burn care and firefighters go hand-in-hand and that partnership should be developed in turn.” Wiggins says that in the United States, there are very few camps that operate directly from hospitals, and in fact a great number operate out of “firefighter groups”.

“A lot of the staff will be counsellors – like myself – and at the moment, the main people I have is a camp nurse (a medical practitioner in the burns unit); I have a co-director who is a firefighter, Chief Ron Fife; I have a professional social worker who is the camp social worker. That is also a very important role because at the camp the kids and adults who come here have a lot to deal with.”



THINKING OF SETTING UP A BURN CAMP?

University of Utah’s Intermountain Burn Centre’s Burn Camp director Brad Wiggins is also current chairperson of the International Association of Burn Camps. “Our goal is to help burn camps start up, help them run their programmes – if they need assistance or advice we’re there,” he says.

For anyone interested in the possibility of setting up a burn camp in Ireland he adds that, “We run a bi-annual workshop; there’s one happening next October (2010) in Missouri which, if anyone is thinking of starting up such a camp, would definitely be a very worthwhile trip.

“The cost of the conference itself is very cheap,” he adds, “at around \$300. It’s definitely something people in the fire services should think about, as well as anyone working in a burn unit.”

Wiggins admits that the effort that goes into running such a burn camp can be a lot to ask anyone but that ultimately there are some great rewards.

“There are about 50 burn camps throughout North America and then there are six throughout the UK that hold burn camps every year. I’ve seen their level of participation, their activeness and professionalism; how they manage camps and it’s obviously a lot of hard work to establish any camp. But if you can get a burn camp up and running and have parents trust that it’s a safe environment for their kids, then it can be a fantastic thing for everyone concerned, the burns survivors, the parents, and all the staff involved.”

For more information on the 2010 International Association of Burn Camps, visit www.iaburncamps.org

SUPPORT NETWORK

Continuing on this train of thought, Wiggins tells how he knows that some parents bring their children to the Salt Lake City camp in order to show their kids that they can still have fun but also because, in the beginning, many burns survivors don’t want to talk about the “burns issues” and it helps to have a support system.

“But once these kids are here you have a support network, you should have options for them to talk about the things that they feel, learn from it, hear what other

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people have to say and really build on their survivorship.” Adding that the Burn Camp also has staff training in order for all of them to learn how to be better counsellors to the survivors, Wiggins also tells how the experience is hugely beneficial to those trying to help the survivors as well.

“I have a lot of staff who tell me that it’s the most rewarding experience of their life. They say that they find when they come to camp they know they’re there for the kids, but the things that they learn about life... a lot of the time they feel like they end up learning more than the kids – because they’re adults; they can process the lessons a lot faster I suppose. They know that they’re helping but they keep coming back year after year because of what they and the kids get out of the experience.” ■