

# The Oregonian

## Camp ties siblings by parents' misdeeds

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By Margie Boule

They came from all over the Northwest and converged on a summer camp in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, for the second year in a row.

All the campers were there with their siblings, but sometimes their siblings were strangers. If they weren't strangers, they were people who shared some awful memories.



MARGIE BOULÉ

Last month I wrote about Karyn Schimmels, a child welfare worker in Oregon's Department of Human Services, who last year, on her own time and with a lot of her own money, created Camp To Belong Northwest. The camp reunites brothers and sisters who've been separated and placed in foster care in Oregon, Washington or Idaho.

For one sun-soaked week last year, and again this summer, siblings got to hang out together, and in some cases got to know each other for the first time.

Now the thank-you notes are rolling in. "I got to know my sister a lot more," wrote a girl named April. "I was very happy to know that all of us foster kids are like biological kids. There is no difference. I learned that this year."

In June, 96 kids who often had thought of themselves as different from "biological kids" were able to spend a solid week with others just like them.

Adults at the camp are counselors and facilitators, nurses and coaches, many once in foster care themselves. "They're not there to be parents or disciplinarians," Karyn says, "just to facilitate and make sure each camper has a good time and an opportunity to connect."

Not all the campers are eager to come. Some, especially the teenagers, are there only because they were told to come. After a week with a younger brother or sister, "those are the ones saying, 'I want to come every year until you tell me I can't come anymore.'"

All week long Karyn and other staff members watched sibling bonding. "A lot of times the only memories these kids have in common is the trauma they endured together. At camp they're not there to relive the trauma." They're at camp to get to know each other in a new way, and to have fun.

"Now when they get together they can say, 'Remember when we went to Camp To Belong, how much fun we had?' Instead of, 'Remember the time Mom and Dad left us at home alone for three days when they went on a drug and drinking binge?'"

This year Karyn was drawn to two brothers. "These young men have experienced much more in life in their years than most of us have as adults. Their lives have been turbulent and full of disappointment."

The boys "could not have been more different" when they arrived, "one sporting a cowboy hat and boots, the other in rocker-style DC wear." The younger boy talked about how he'd never learned to interact with his older brother, to show him he cared.

But the older brother was suffering; his girlfriend had just broken up with him. "I watched his younger brother comfort him all week in a way he'd never had the opportunity to," Karyn says. "He'd sit close to him and would usually have his arms wrapped around his brother's shoulder, speaking softly to him, offering words of comfort." Karyn saw "tenderness, and jovial, boisterous brotherly camaraderie" develop.

The boys "walked side by side to every event." When the bus arrived at the end of the week, boys who had been strangers "sat side by side all the way home."

Before they left, all the children made comfort blankets and pillows for their siblings. On them they wrote messages to each other.

"Jen," one boy wrote to his sister, "I want you to know that I love you more than anyone else. You are awesome."

"Dear Logan, I have had so much fun being with you this week and learning what it feels like to have a big brother. Thank-you! Lucas"

"I love my sister!!! Bobby"

"Nate, I love you so much and I wish I could live with you. I will do my best for you to know that I love you so."

"I love you with all my heart! Take this blanket wherever you are and I will be there. Shantelle"

"Dave, I feel so grateful to be your big sister and to have you in my life. I love you. L."

"Reggie, One love, one blood. We have been through so much, and even though we have been separated, we have stuck it through together. I love you so much. Kelli"

"Chris, even though we don't get to see each other that much, you will always be the only brother I will ever want and the only brother I will ever need. Mary"

Karyn is trying to raise enough money so she can have two sessions of Camp To Belong next year. (To donate, go to [www.ofpa.com](http://www.ofpa.com) and click on "Camp To Belong.")

"These children are the strongest young people I have ever met," Karyn says. "They are resilient in the face of adversity and display love when often the world has not given them reason to love."