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Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation president

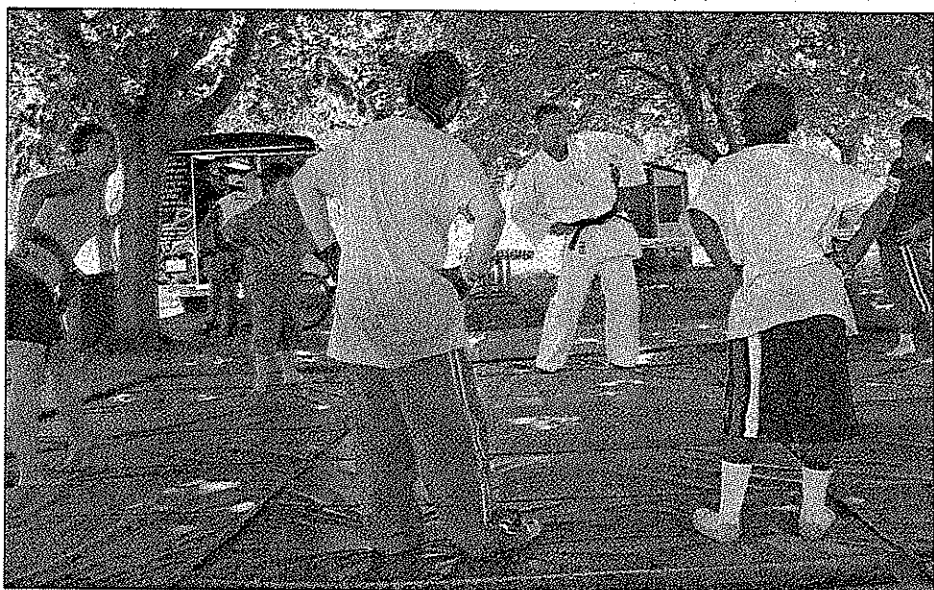


PHOTOS BY KURT HEGRE/THE FRESNO BEE

Above: Ashley, 16, of Olivehurst leaps from a platform onto a padded landing area Monday at Wonder Valley Ranch near Sanger. Ashley and more than 150 other kids who are burn victims are treated to a week at the camp held by the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation. **Below:** Harry Franklin, center, a firefighter with the Santa Clara Fire Department, leads a judo class at Wonder Valley Ranch Monday. Firefighters and nurses from around the state volunteer at the camp.

Away from the stares

Burn victims are treated to a week
at Wonder Valley Ranch by the
Alisa Ann Ruch foundation.



By Pablo Lopez
The Fresno Bee

WONDER VALLEY — For 51 weeks each year, the children endure stares because of their burned, scarred bodies. But this week, they can forget their painful challenges thanks to the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation, which has paid the expenses for about 130 burn victims at Wonder Valley Ranch Resort, 30 miles east of Fresno. "It's awesome here," said a Hanford

teen who goes by "Thumper" at the camp. "I love these people because they really care about us."

Her story is similar to the other campers: A relative cooking french fries accidentally burned her with hot grease. She was 12, but she has never forgotten how her friends and classmates stared at her burned body, making her recovery tougher.

"I don't care if you stare, but don't be afraid to ask what happened," she said.

At Champ Camp, no one is staring or asking personal questions, said

Dave Miller, the foundation's president. In addition to feeling at ease, the children get to meet others who have gone through similar experiences.

"The goal is for them to be kids again," he said. "If they want to talk about it [their burns] they can, but it's not required."

There are 1.25 million burn injuries each year in the United States, according to the foundation's Web site. In California, about 10,000 people are burned severely enough each year to require medical attention.

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To learn more

Information about the Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation can be found at www.aarbf.org or by calling regional manager Renee Cozens at (559) 224-7223.

Camp: 'A big deal for them'

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Renee Cozens, the foundation's regional manager in Fresno, said everyone should be thinking of fire prevention because summer brings barbecues, fireworks and campfires. Children also have more free time to get into mischief because school is out.

At Wonder Valley, the campers are divided by age and assigned to volunteers, many of whom are firefighters, nurses and other burn specialists. Everyone has a nickname to make camp life fun and informal.

Among the staff volunteers

are Clovis firefighters Tim Lesmeister and Chris Bridger, who used their vacation time to help out. Lesmeister goes by "Doofus" and Bridger goes by "Rocks."

"Society is tough enough on children. This is a big deal for them. It gives them a chance to let loose," Bridger said.

The foundation has been doing Champ Camp for 21 years, the last 19 at Wonder Valley, said Miller, who goes by "Shakespeare." Though the camp helps the children build self-esteem, Miller said, the foundation's real goal is to reduce the number of campers through fire prevention.

"I love it here," said a

9-year-old Vallejo girl who goes by name of "Anahi."

When she was a baby, Anahi said, she was burned with hot water in a tub, but she doesn't recall the rest of the details.

This year Anahi reunited with friends from last year. She also made a few new friends. "I could come here every year," Anahi said.

The campers came from throughout California and parts of Arizona, Utah, Oregon and Mexico. Though Miller said the camp isn't designed to be therapeutic for the children — there's no social work or counseling

going on — some of the volunteers said their lives have been rejuvenated.

"Sometimes we deal with death so much, we wonder if it's worth it," said Diana Calderon, a registered nurse at University Medical Center in Fresno and a camp volunteer who goes by the name "Sali."

But seeing all the children having fun has made nursing worthwhile, Calderon said: "I realize I can actually make a difference."

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