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CHAMP CAMP: TURNING VICTIMS INTO SURVIVORS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY COREY RALSTON

It is a magical place that would get any child excited, but the children who return to Champ Camp each year are not just any children. They are survivors of painful, scarring, life-altering burns.

Celebrating 25 years this summer, the Alisa Ann Ruch Foundation has been creating a dream come true for more than a hundred children annually. Champ Camp, nestled in the foothills of Wonder Valley Ranch, is a haven of waterslides, go-karts, and bonding time between friends. It is a refuge reserved for courageous children who have lived through burn accidents who look forward to the one week each year where they get to be treated not as victims, but as survivors.

The Alisa Ann Ruch Foundation was created in 1971 after its namesake was fatally burned in a barbecuing accident at the age of 8. Her family devoted their lives to creating a foundation to assist families of children who have been burned. Firefighters, emergency service workers and other caring individuals come together to make life better for the burn survivors, while working to promote burn prevention in hopes of someday eliminating burn accidents involving children.

Earlier this summer, 113 campers ranging in age from 5 to 16 left their families, cell phones and gaming devices at home to come to a place where they feel no different than every other kid for a week. They participate in a never-ending list of activities like riflery, swimming, canoeing, playing in the mud pit, and horseback riding.

"These kids wait all year to come here because of the bond they have formed with each other," Development Coordinator Chanda Guerin says. "For them, this place is like the Hilton – it's the greatest place ever."

Guerin notes that many of the campers have lost their innocence at a young age as they endured medical procedures and spent time hospitalized to treat their burns. So while they may look different on the outside, she says that on the inside, each child just wants to run and play.

"The kids get stared at every day when they are at school," Guerin says. "Once they are here, they do not get judged. They can just be kids."

A majority of camp counselors are active duty firefighters. Many of these brave men and women encounter situations in which

there are no burn survivors. Here, they are able to find hope in what they do.

One of those firefighters is Julie Dejarlais, who has been a camp counselor for four years. Her spunk and enthusiasm clearly draw children to her, but Dejarlais says that she is the one who is inspired.

"These kids are more of a hero than I will ever be," she says. "They inspire me everyday. It is an honor that they let me come out here every year and be a part of this."



Maria Melendrez is attending her last Champ Camp. She is 16 now, and has been attending since she was 5. Melendrez is living proof of how Champ Camp changes lives. She remembers being a scared 5-year-old who was self-conscious about her scars and had limited English-speaking skills. She gained more self-confidence during each summer spent at camp, and now she is able to share that with other campers. She is not afraid to wear sun dresses anymore, and for the first time, she proudly

took off her wig to show how beautiful she truly is.

"I try to cheer others on because I am someone who went through the same thing that they are going through," Melendrez says. "Connecting with other burn survivors makes you feel not alone."

Next year, Melendrez plans to return to Champ Camp as a counselor in training, a program offered for survivors ages 17 to 21. She has already told her mother that she will not be attending her high school graduation because it would interfere with camp.

"I want to give back because these kids have made me so happy," she says.

And it appears likely she will, in more ways than one. Melendrez already has aspirations of being a firefighter so that she can teach other burn victims that there is a life to be lived beyond their injuries. **fm**

The Alisa Ann Ruch Burn Foundation is always in need of donations to keep their organization going. Although the camp is free to all children thanks to donations, it costs \$750 for each child to attend. Please visit aarbf.org to learn how to get involved and change lives.