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HOPE FLOATS FAMILIES WITH SEPT. 11 LOSSES CONNECT, PLAY AT CAMP

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CASCO, Maine - The moms watched and wept, juggling babies with one hand and cameras with the other. The kids launched their boats - adorned with glitter, flowers, shells, beads - and made their guileless wishes.

They wished for Pokemon cards. A great life. A million dollars. A dog. They wished to "have dad here when I have problems." To "see my dad in my dreams." And for "daddy to come home."

The wish boats were another small step toward healing for about 30 families who lost a loved one Sept. 11. Mostly mothers and children, they came together this week to mend and swim and share the bittersweetness of being in a place where, in the words of one mother, "We don't have to explain."

The free "Ray of Hope" week was held at Camp Sunshine, normally a summer retreat for children with serious illnesses and their families. It drew Sept. 11 families bearing photographs, memories, a sense of isolation, and a touch of unease about what they'd find.

The kids found, often for the first time, others just like them, robbed suddenly of too much. The mothers found respite, kayaks, therapy, volleyball, the reckless pleasure of eating dinner with only grown-ups, a chance to share their strength and grief. Nancy McCardle Yambem lost her husband, Jupiter, on the 106th floor of a World Trade Center tower. She brought her 5-year-old son Shanti and a thick binder of photos, e-mails, recollections of "Jupe," and a friend's letter to Shanti telling him "all about your papa Jupiter, the best papa in the whole wide world."

Shortly before Sept. 11, Shanti had begun sleeping alone. Now he sleeps with his mother again "because he needs me right next to him."

The gift of this week, said Yambem, was the company of others struggling to cope and move on. "It's a chance for the kids to realize they're not alone," she said, "and for us to be with people who understand."

Founded in 1984, Camp Sunshine hosts families of children with cancer, kidney disease, lupus, and juvenile diabetes. Their sleek new campus on Sebago Lake, with housing for 40 families, boasts amenities from archery and paddle boats to a computer lab and medical clinic.

With its focus on mending the fabric of family life, the camp is well suited to meet the needs of families traumatized by Sept. 11, said executive director Matt Hoidal. He plans another such week in October.

"We've always helped families in crisis," he said. "It's a different form of crisis, but this is what we do. We're a family program, and we help people cope."

The week drew 27 mothers, one father, and more than 60 kids, mostly toddlers up to about age 10. With them was an army of 75 volunteers, many of them high school and college students, in yellow Sunshine T-shirts.

The program, funded by Lions Club International and UJA-Federation of New York, offered a range of activities from crafts for tots to adult karaoke, and optional therapy groups for parents and teens - dubbed by one girl as "seeing the shrinky-dink." For women often leaving home for the first time since Sept. 11, said Nancy Cincotta, the camp's psychosocial director, "the fact of arrival is a real accomplishment." She described "a strong company of women" finding themselves anew, whether through counseling or climbing a rock wall.

Above all, they are the zealous caretakers of their children. "They are grieving for the life they had. But there's also this sense of, 'This is the life I have now, and I'm gonna make my kids' lives the best they can be.' "

For children who'd often "thought they were the only one," comfort is found in sheer numbers. And in small victories.

Down at the lake, wet-haired kids bobbed in Day-Glo life vests, shrieking "Lookit me!" and "I just stepped on a baby shark!"

Five-year-old Oral Lindo, who faced his first panicked day sheathed in myriad flotation devices, jumped into the water again and again.

The women, too, enjoyed small pleasures.

One night they ate supper on their own: roast beef (not chicken tenders), Caesar salad (not carrot sticks), and Diet Coke (not juice), in wine glasses, even.

Much of the healing was impromptu. At computers to check e-mail and weather forecasts, the talk drifted inexorably to Sept. 11. To support groups they've joined. To books on healing they've bought but not had the time or will to read. To their denial that day, as they calculated how long it would take husbands who they were sure had survived to walk home to New Jersey. To home videos they now watch - or can't bear to - to hear their husbands' voices.

The task, said Diane Taormina, is "to gather yourself up for the rest of your life." Taormina's husband, Dennis, worked on the 98th floor of the north tower. She came to the Maine camp with her two daughters; her sister, Carol Linehan, another Sept. 11 widow; Linehan's two children; and another sister for support.

It was hard packing for the trip: It made her think about her last trip, when she had a husband to go with her.

"The kids make you get past that moment," she said. "You have to, or you'd never go forward."

On the night of July Fourth, the families launched their wish boats to the sounds of Elton John's "Circle of Life." A few drops of rain fell in the still-muggy air.

Wiping away tears, they trekked up to a final Celebration Show.

The highlight was the performance by a team of eight giggling mothers who dubbed themselves "The Heroes."

"We - are - fa-mi-ly!" sang the women who have lost husbands and learned to change fuses and gotten their kids, in spite of life, to school each morning. "I've got all my heroes with me! We - are - fa-mi-ly!"

The crowd loved it. They understood.

Caption:

1. Children who lost a loved one in the terrorist attacks launched wish boats during a week in Maine. / GLOBE PHOTO / JOEL PAGE
 2. Tariq Williams, 7, of Arizona, playing guitar as volunteer Sara Szkola sang to Sara Pabon, 6, of New York. About 30 families attended the free "Ray of Hope" week at Camp Sunshine in Maine. / AP PHOTOPHOTO
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