

**Katherine Mulligan**  
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**A Summer at Camp Wapiyapi: Experience and Evaluation of Pediatric Oncology Camps –  
Brody Scholars Summer Enrichment Program**



"Discrimination free, judgment free, Camp Wapiyapi makes us happy!" The spoken word lyrics ring through the large, open room with resounding pride, exuberance, and even a touch of defiance. It is a Saturday night, the night of the much anticipated camp-wide talent show, and everyone listens as one of the camper's relays her original song/poem, putting into words the intangible atmosphere of love and unconditional acceptance that the camp has exuded all week. There is barely a dry eye in the room, and the camper receives a thunderous standing ovation.

It was moments such as the one above that colored my entire two weeks at Camp Wapiyapi and illustrate its uniqueness in the world of pediatric cancer. Camp Wapiyapi, positioned between snowcapped mountains in the Rocky Mountains of Estes Park, Colorado, in a place so remote and beautiful that thoughts of hospitals, chemotherapy, and sickness often seem far off, has been operating as a camp for pediatric cancer patients and their siblings since 1998, when the camp was established by University of Colorado medical students and doctors. As Wu et al. states, the main goal of many summer camps for pediatric cancer patients is to improve the "psychosocial functioning" of children, all while offering them a typical summer camp experience.<sup>2</sup> Camp Wapiyapi indeed aims to offer a place of healing outside of the hospital and clinic and an "escape" from cancer, to offer campers an amazing summer camp experience, and to support families by allowing siblings to participate and by offering parents a few days of respite. After spending two sessions at the camp, talking with numerous campers, and hearing testimonies such as the poem above, I came to understand that the camp's most important role is actually providing an incredibly strong community and a safe haven for every child - from the burden of being sick, from the teasing, questions, and discrimination that pediatric cancer patients are often subjected to at school and in everyday life (from losing their hair, from sustaining other physical or mental changes, etc), from having to watch a sibling endure having cancer, and so much more. In addition to the safe space that the camp created, the sense of community that Camp Wapiyapi fostered was truly unparalleled. Although each camp session lasts just 5 days, the bonds between campers and counselors, among counselors and other camp staff, and among counselors and camper's families was truly amazing. The camp serves as a place for children to simultaneously toss thoughts of cancer to the wind and enjoy a typical summer camp experience, and also bond

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with other children who have had similar experiences and build a network of social support in an established and compassionate community.

Camp Wapiyapi is organized into 3, five-day sessions, and attempts to accommodate as many children as possible. Campers are composed of children aged 6-17 who have had cancer at any time during their lives or who have had siblings who have had cancer at any point in time. The camp currently takes place at Covenant Heights Retreat Center (a religious facility, though Camp Wapiyapi is secular), nestled between Long's Peak (one of Colorado's 14,000 foot mountains) and other chains of rocky, snow-capped mountains. The camp's remote location precludes cell phone service or internet access, which was a huge benefit, as it enabled volunteers to focus solely on the campers, and the campers to focus exclusively on the camp experience.



A view of the front of camp - the dining hall on the left and a gathering space (for events like the talent show) on the right. Long's Peak is pictured in the background.

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A view of camp from the back – the volleyball court can be seen to the right, and a playground, mini golf, tether ball, swing set, and basketball court are all in the area as well.

Camp Wapiyapi is unique in many ways, but especially in its structure – each camper (patient or sibling) is paired with an adult “companion” who stays with them and does all camp activities with them for the entire camp session. Camper/companion pairs are subsequently placed into one of six different color teams with a team leader and cabin captain. I was a companion for both of the camp sessions that I volunteered at and was paired with a 10 year old girl for the first session and an 11 year old girl for the second. This unique camper/companion set-up ensures that each camper is able to have the camp experience that they want, and prevents any camper from feeling left out, excluded, or lonely. The camper/companion set-up can be summarized by an affectionate phrase that was shared with the companions during our afternoon of training - “If your camper wants to play mini golf all week; you will be playing mini golf all week!”

Camp begins with an afternoon and evening of companion training before the kids arrive. We spent this time covering light topics, such as the rules of camp and campfire songs, as well as more substantial topics, such as how to respond if a child brings up their or their sibling’s cancer. As with all other aspects of camp, we were encouraged to let our camper guide us in these discussions – if they wanted to talk about their cancer, we should let them bring it up when and only if they desired, in the manner that best suited them, and it was fine (and even encouraged)

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for us to simply acknowledge that we listened. As the camp explained, simply telling one's story is therapeutic.

On the second day of camp, the children arrived, and their arrival was marked by the "Tunnel of Love," a joyous event that entailed volunteers cheering and forming a tunnel that each camper came through when they arrived. Companions got to meet camper's families and get them settled in their cabins and ready for the week. Each session began with a kick-off campfire in the evening and time for campers to get to know their companion, cabin mates, and fellow color team members.

Each day of camp featured a wide variety of team and individual activities. Team activities included field day-type games, team skits, events at the camp's lake, team games, and a newspaper fashion show. Individual activities included everything from archery to spa day (featuring "facials" of sea salt, lotion, and cucumbers!) to zip lining, kayaking, canoeing, arts and crafts, egg drop challenges, movie nights, the talent show, a dance, mini golf, basketball, volleyball, playground activities, gold panning, a hands-on anatomy lesson, large group games, and virtually anything else a camper wanted to do!



Zip lining at camp!



"Spa Day" was a camp favorite!

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Lake activities included kayaking, canoeing, stand-up paddle boarding, and fishing.

During the first session, my camper was Emily,\* a 10 year old girl who shared with me that her brother (who was also a camper) had leukemia five years ago. He was as active and energetic as any other 11 year old. Emily and I shared many similar interests and quickly bonded over musical theater and the outdoors. Emily had plenty of energy and loved to zip line, make bracelets at the Craft Shack, kayak, and participate in all of the team activities. During this first week, it was often easy to forget that I was at a camp for children affected by pediatric cancer due to her (and her brother's) robust health. However, there were innumerable moments during the week that simply prevented one from forgetting – the hopeful “Cure Pediatric Cancer” bumper sticker on Emily's parents car, the way Emily would run over to see her brother in between activities and fix his hair, how she described being frustrated when kids at school used to tease her brother about looking weak and not athletic due to his chemotherapy treatments, and the talent show in which children as young as 6 cried during spoken word performances and songs by their friends at camp who expressed their feelings, suffering, and experiences with pediatric cancer.

During the second camp session, my camper was Jenny. Jenny was also a 10 year old girl, yet her experiences had been much different from those of Emily, and pediatric cancer felt much

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more like an unwelcome shadow this week. Jenny shared with me that she had had kidney cancer relatively recently and was close to being in remission. Her hair was thin still, and we occasionally had to take breaks to rest. In addition, after the poems and songs performed at the talent show, in which her fellow campers expressed their trials and tribulations with pediatric cancer, she cried with her fellow campers, as well as their companions and myself. Yet Jenny's spirit and vigor for life was strong, and she loved to participate in all of the activities that Emily had during the first week. Jenny especially loved to run, and would from time to time spontaneously suggest that we race across camp. Jenny also became close with several of the girls in our cabin, and one friendship in particular stood out. On the first night, Jenny befriended Lilly, another 11 year old girl who had had cancer. Throughout the afternoon, Lilly had been extremely quiet and shy, but when she met Jenny and the two began to talk, Lilly opened up tremendously. She joked and laughed, and she bonded with Jenny over their shared experiences. For example, they casually discussed what foods they would no longer eat because the taste had been ruined by their chemotherapy treatments. Children who have had cancer have life experiences that are quite different from those of their peers. Camp Wapiyapi provides these kids with a safe space to talk about their shared experiences, to reflect and process, to understand and compare, and to feel less different and isolated.

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Lilly (left) and Jenny (right).



Jenny examining her vial of gold after gold panning with experts who volunteered their time at camp!

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Undoubtedly, it seemed to me that Camp Wapiyapi supported kid's emotionally, physically, and socially, and facilitated healthy growth and development as well. Although the literature on summer camps for children with illnesses/chronic illnesses is not extensive, the existing studies certainly support the notion that these summer camps support kid's psychosocial functioning. As <sup>1</sup>Wu, McPhail et al. found in a multisite study of 19 different summer oncology camps, social functioning and self-esteem were highly ranked by children who attended the camps.

Interestingly, this study also found that whether or not a sibling was grieving (due to loss of sibling) did not significantly impact their experience, and thus, summer camps such as Camp Wapiyapi should be recommended for siblings at any time, as they will all derive approximately equal benefit and value. Wu, McPhail et al. note that it is important for physicians who work with pediatric cancer patients and their siblings to be aware of summer oncology camps so that they can encourage patient participation and be able to explain the potential benefits.

From reading articles, such as the Wu, McPhail et al. study, and from my experience at Camp Wapiyapi, I learned many things about the pediatric cancer experience that I doubt I would have picked up on in the clinic. Navigating the social and psychological challenges that plague not just the patient, but the family and siblings are extremely important to consider. For example, one counselor who previously had cancer shared with me that when she was undergoing treatment, her 15 year old brother had to spend weeks at a time home by himself (while the parents were at the hospital) and subsequently developed depression and even attempted suicide. Another social challenge that was brought up by several campers was that people at school often did not believe that they or their sibling had cancer but that they were simply trying to get attention.

An experience such as Camp Wapiyapi has provided me with invaluable information, first hand from pediatric cancer patients and their families, regarding the psychological, social, and physical hurdles that they face. This is especially important to me, as I plan to work with children in some capacity in my medical career, either as a pediatrician or a family medicine physician. To volunteer with this population was a privilege, and their vigor for life, grit, and perseverance is unparalleled and tremendously inspiring. I am incredibly thankful to the Brody Family and the Brody Scholarship for funding this opportunity. \*

\*= names changed to maintain privacy (photos of campers were allowed to be taken and distributed)



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Works Cited

<sup>1</sup>Wu YP, McPhail J, Mooney R, et al. "A Multisite Evaluation of Summer Camps for Children with Cancer and Their Siblings." *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*. Volume 34, Issue 6. Nov 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Wu, YP, Prout K, Roberts MC, Parikshak S, Amylon MD. "Assessing Experiences of Children Who Attended a Camp for Children with Cancer and Their Siblings: A Preliminary Study." *Child and Youth Care Forum*. Volume 40, Issue 2. Apr 2011.