

A Farewell Note from Denise

The 2019 camp season was my last as one of the three Camp Celiac Directors. The decision to step down has been difficult and the proverbial emotional roller coaster, but it has been something that I have been working towards for two years.

I know that camp remains in excellent hands and will continue to thrive. Mike Richman has been a Director with me for 10 years and is remaining in his position. Laura Carroll, who took over a few years ago for Lisa Walton, is also remaining as a Director. Anne-Marie Reber, a counselor for many years, is stepping up to fill my role, and camp is lucky to have her. These three people have unbelievable energy, buckets of great ideas, boundless optimism, and an enormous capacity for giving.

When I look back on how I started with Camp Celiac, it amazes me that the years have gone by so quickly. My first year was in 2002 as a counselor when my children were 7 and 10, and I continued as a cabin counselor until 2009. When the opportunity arose in 2009 to be a Director for Camp Celiac 2010, I didn't hesitate, and I have enjoyed being in this role for 10 years.

The reason I did not hesitate in 2009 was because of the mental images I had of the campers, my own included, holding onto each other for dear life at check-out, begging their parents for 10 more minutes. I heard the camp songs rattling around my head, and thought of the campers singing them at full-volume around a campfire, building an inclusive micro-community that would seldom exist within a school setting. I was thinking of my very dear friends who I had the absolute pleasure of co-counseling with in Waterfront, when there wasn't even a Woodside group yet, when we would meet outside the cabins in the morning and sip our coffee. I remember the skunk....but that's another story.

Camp Celiac is surreal. It creates an indescribable and overwhelming feeling of well, ...magic, that is somehow forged in one week on a little piece of land in Rhode Island. Add in over 120 kids, some willing volunteers, some gluten-free treats, and an adventure is produced that can only be experienced to be understood.

I remember one year as a Director, a 16 year old who was aging out the same year as my daughter, told me something on his last day at camp that I have always kept in my box of mental memories. He said that his first year as an 11 year old, he cried all the way down the road from check-in to the Waterfront area because he did not want his parents to leave him, and then he cried all the way up the road on Friday after check-out because he did not want to leave. THIS is why we do camp. Showing these kids that they are not different and they are not alone on their journey of living life gluten free, and they can be kids just like everyone else. We give them a safe place, a fun place, a place to make new friends, the chance to meet other kids with Celiac, a place where they don't have to explain why they can't have that cupcake thank you very much, a place where they don't have to worry about what they can or can't eat at their next meal, and then we feed them lots and lots of delicious gluten free meals and snacks. THIS is what it is all about and THIS is why we all volunteer.

The 18 years I spent with Camp Celiac are irreplaceable and represent some of the best of my life. The memories I have are countless and always make me smile. I saw someone at the 20th reunion gala and we both went straight to the same memory and could not help but to laugh out loud. The friendships I have made through camp are enduring and it has been a privilege and an honor to volunteer over the years with so many gracious, outstanding people.

I am sure my daughter might disagree with me, but I view her diagnosis through a silver lining. Without her being diagnosed at 3 years of age, neither she nor I would have all these people in our lives. She was a camper from age 7-16, and has been a volunteer for the past 8 years. Camp is truly part of who we are now and the friends and experiences we have made will stay with us forever.

For those of you who know me, you are probably asking, will Deanna still come to camp? I made sure that my daughter would continue volunteering before I let myself commit to myself to step down. So yes, Deanna will still be the camp Chef, leading a small but merry band of volunteers to stand in a hot, un-airconditioned kitchen producing three ridiculously delicious gluten free meals a day.

Thank you for the best 18 years of my life and I wish camp continued success for another 20 years!

Denise Segreti