

Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



7/11/68 The Guys In Cabin 7

Camp Harmon — I have been assigned to Cabin 7 for the night, and the guys in here range in ages from 6 to 10, and they are just as normal as any kid on your block, with one minor variation.

They are all crippled.

There are about 60 kids spending two weeks here at the Easter Seal Crippled Childrens' camp among the redwoods and pines, straddling the headwaters of the San Lorenzo river, three miles north of Boulder Creek.

At first you bust up a little inside, trying not to let it show around the rims of your eyes.

This is an outsider's reaction.

If you work here, you learn to knock this off or you won't be of any use at all.

Walking around to the swimming pool, the archery range, the fishing hole and craft shop I closed my eyes and the shouts of fun, giggling of girls were of kids everywhere.

★ ★ ★

The Cabin 7 boys call themselves the Kukuburras — funny birds.

There is Mark, 10. Polio has left him with a deep limp, but you ought to see him bob up a dirt trail!

His father is foreman on a game refuge and the terrible thing about Mark's case is that he contacted polio just a month before Dr. Salk's vaccine was released.

He made a braided key chain for me out of plastic strips; a fine, tight job, and I am sure going to use it.

★ ★ ★

Bunking next to me is Goodtime Charlie.

Charlie is 9—his dad drives a tractor—and he is confined to a wheelchair with cerebral palsy.

This boy is a hellion in his chair. Thinks he's Sterling Moss. A super wiggle-wort.

I will always remember Charlie because of his constant unbridled happiness that forces a real handsomeness on his contorted face.

He flails his uncontrollable arms so often in mirth and shouts of glee at my corniest jokes that I named him Goodtime Charlie and everybody in Cabin 7 has taken up the nickname.

Charlie said he wanted to be an electrician when he grew up, and I said, "What a shocking ambition," and you'd think I was Bob Hope!

★ ★ ★

On the other side of my bed is Joe. Joe is mentally retarded; he is 9 and very handsome but

he doesn't smile; just sort of stands and stares.

I'll take that back. I saw him singing once when we were walking to chow, but generally he's quiet and follows the gang.

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Benny is a small Italian guy of 8 and bunks over near the far wall. His right arm is completely paralyzed due to hemiplegia.

His father is a farm laborer. I see him smiling a great deal and he can throw a fast pillow with his left arm. Benny gets along pretty good and runs a lot.

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There are two counselors in the cabin. One is Dave Park, a senior at Humboldt State College who will some day teach speech to the deaf. We call him Ensign Parker because he looks so much like the confused naval officer in McHale's navy on TV.

The other is Vince Louie, a physical therapy graduate of San Jose State.

There is a counselor for every two to three kids in camp and they receive only \$300 for 10 weeks of this kind of work, and brother, it's work—like 18 hours a day.

These children need constant supervision. They have day braces and night braces and toilet problems.

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The fifth guy in Cabin 7 is Bruce, 9, who has muscular dystrophy.

Little by little his muscles are wasting away. His life will be short.

I like Bruce because he can draw a beautiful whale with what strength he can muster in his right arm.

He sits in his wheelchair and doesn't miss a thing — bright, good looking, and a lively conversationalist.

At bedtime, Bruce has to be placed in his bunk and then turned during the night by the counselor so he won't get bed sores.

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And then there is Phil the 49er, age 9.

Phil has cerebral palsy also and he's the toughest to be with and not use the lump in your throat.

He walks, but his legs are in steel braces. He uses hand crutches and wears a regulation football helmet and face guard to protect him when he falls.

Phil doesn't walk, really — he charges like a wobbly halfback, worrying me half to death. His eyes are slightly crossed and he has trouble with his speech, but, Lord, the kid's got guts.

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There is none of this: "Oh you poor little crippled kid" baloney around Camp Harmon.

They are helped, but not pampered. Actually you begin to notice that they are more normal than the average kid; most are more philosophically advanced, more gutty, more appreciative of the basic offerings of life.

Their capacity for hell raising is normal also.

They come from rich and poor families and being crippled is incidental to their way of thinking.

They want to get on with living.

Right smack after breakfast this morning the first thing Goodtime Charlie said, as he hot-rodged his wheelchair away from the table, was:

"Hey, let's go on a hike!"

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