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CAMPS

A camp for living

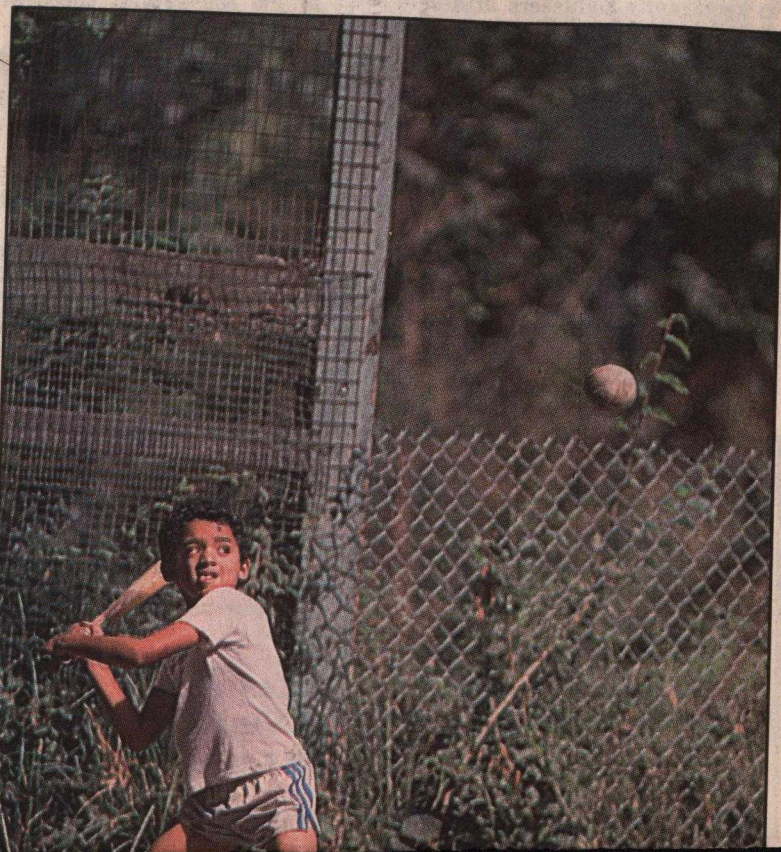
Cancer kids
enjoy week
in nature

By RICHARD EMANUEL
Sentinel staff writer

THROUGH THE outstretched limbs of soaring redwood trees, fingers of green-filtered sunlight grope down toward a small stage painted flat-black. To one side of the stage, three young girls wrapped in rainbow-colored raiment giggle and strike theatrical poses as if all the world were a stage.

They look as if they were born for the stage. In reality, one of the little girls is lucky to have been born at all. Another is lucky to be alive.

They are guests at a summer camp sponsored by the Children's Cancer Research Institute, of San Francisco. The week-long family event ended Saturday at Monte...



...at Monte Toyon Camp, in Aptos.

Dr. Jordan Wilbur, medical director and guiding spirit of the institute, is a friendly man, 6-foot-4, with gray hair, wearing jeans and a rumpled, red windbreaker. He sits in Monte Toyon's rustic dining hall, sipping apple juice and talking about his work.

From the camp kitchen across the room come the mingled sounds of running water, the clatter of metal pots and an AM radio station. In a small room a few feet from Wilbur, a young mother can be seen changing her infant's diapers.

"WE HAVE about 60 people at the camp, about 20 of them are patients," says Wilbur. "The rest are mostly family members. Some of the patients are cured, through with treatment, but they keep in touch. The camp is free.

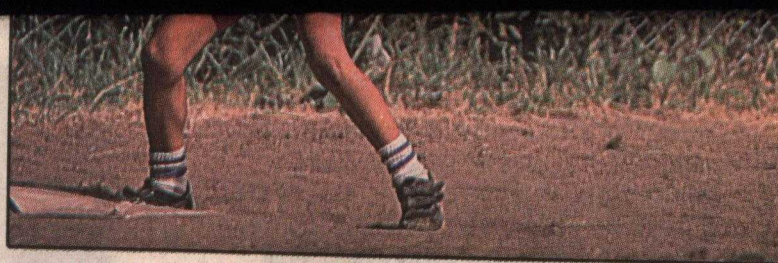
"About one in 800 children will develop cancer," he says. "That doesn't sound like a lot, but it's still the leading disease causing death in children."

Wilbur has worked with child cancer patients for the last two decades. In 1972, he started a children's cancer program at Stanford Medical Center. He moved to San Francisco in 1977, becoming head of the Children's Cancer Research Institute, an independent medical program based at Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center.

"It's in children's cancer that the most progress has been made in the last 20 years," Wilbur says. "When I got into this, most of our patients died and people treated the disease accordingly." For many patients who did survive, it was at the cost of a limb.

"Now, over half our patients are cured," he says. "With some cancers, the cure rate is over 90 percent." Combinations of radi-

Please see CAMP — E3



Jason Hardin keeps his eye on the ball at Monte Toyon.



Counselor Ariel King chats with camper Jennifer Hood, left.



Camper Michaela King, right, thinks all the world's a stage now that she's licked cancer.



Counselor and assistant camp director Sharlyn Sawyer helps Brigit Colwell with her mask.

Photos by Bill Lovejoy

Camp/ Under redwoods, cancer seems light years away

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ation and drug therapy allow doctors to save many limbs that would have been amputated a decade ago.

"We have a definite philosophy in our program," Wilbur explains. "First, the patient is the heart of the treatment team. We tell them they are responsible for their own treatment, and we involve the whole family. Parents learn to give medications and draw blood from catheters, both in the hospital and out. When I get a phone call, my wife can't tell whether I'm talking to a parent or a physician — we talk about blood counts and drugs.

"Second, we use aggressive treatment," he continues. "I don't go along with treating people just to keep them comfortable. We don't regard anybody as hopeless, and we treat everybody with the expectation that they will be cured. We know not everybody is going to be cured, but we approach things that way."

Since Wilbur expects his patients to be cured, he believes in treating them as normally as possible. "The tendency used to be to take kids out of school, to spoil them," he says, "but that can lead to problems later if they are cured. We have found that, even for those who die, life is better if they are treated as normally as possible."

OUTSIDE THE dining hall, a family group plays ping-pong. A large group of kids of diverse ages is playing baseball. Wilbur's

own son, Benjamin, 5, plays in the sand.

"Kids are just kids," Wilbur says, "whether they have cancer or not. 'That's what this summer camp is about.'"

Strolling about the campground, Wilbur draws smiles and greetings from everyone he sees. Knots of people, some family groups and some just clusters of friends, busy themselves with organized and informal activities.

In a sunny clearing, a dozen people of all ages are making masks. Kids sit, faces raised toward the sun, waiting for facial molds to dry so they can be removed for painting.

"The girl in the wheelchair is Jennifer Hood," of Mill Valley, Wilbur says. He indicates a fresh-faced girl of 16, in an orange-and-white striped outfit, sitting in a power wheelchair.

"She has a brain tumor and it has damaged her motor system," he says. "It's a little hard to understand her when she talks, so she uses a computer system on her wheelchair to communicate."

"We had her up on a horse yesterday," he says. "It was her first time."

As Jennifer types something into her computer, a tall, black woman strokes her hair and watches words form on the screen. "That's Ariel King," Wilbur says. "She was a patient, but she's been cured. She's a counselor this year. She lives in Hawaii, now."

Robert Crosby, 19, of Clovis, is a

good-looking lad with chiseled features and intense blue eyes. His short hair, growing back after what he expects to be his final chemotherapy treatment three weeks ago, looks pretty fashionable in 1988. In a couple more weeks, the long scar on his right forearm will be the only remaining outward sign of his 13-month fight against bone cancer.

"It was kind of scary," he says, "walking into the hospital and not knowing what to expect. What they did with my arm hadn't really been done before."

Crosby had a large tumor on his radius, near the wrist. Until recently, doctors would have amputated his arm near the elbow. Instead, with a combination of chemotherapy to shrink the tumor followed by surgery, Crosby's arm has been saved. In September, when the doctors say his arm is strong enough, he plans to return to his old job, installing car stereos.

"Right now, I'm hangin' out, enjoying summer," he says with a grin. "I'm gonna go camping with friends, float some rivers."

At the cancer camp, Crosby has been talking with 13-year old Trent Scott, of Redding. Scott has a tumor on his leg similar to the one Crosby had on his arm. He has been undergoing chemotherapy and is almost ready for surgery.

"I like talking to people here," Crosby says of the camp. "It helps if you can make it easier for somebody else."

SEATED IN a small amphitheater beneath towering redwoods, a handful of young mothers and counselors watch and coach three little girls on a small stage. Michaela King, wrapped in white and purple cloth, throws her head back so the sunlight catches her corona of curly blonde hair.

"Michaela had a soft-tissue tumor," Wilbur says quietly, nodding toward the stage. "She's probably cured."

"And that one is Sechelle," he says. "She was the baby who was supposed to be aborted."

Sechelle Van Genechten, 4, has straight, brown hair and dark glittering eyes. Her mother, Anne, was

diagnosed with leukemia early in her pregnancy.

"Several physicians recommended that she have an abortion and start chemotherapy right away," Wilbur says. "But if you select the drugs, you can avoid harming the baby. We did that, and now she has a healthy child running around. Her mother has probably been cured, too." Wilbur smiles, then turns and walks away.

Wilbur talks about patients still in the hospital in San Francisco, too ill to attend this summer's camp. Some will, no doubt, attend next year's camp. Others, no doubt, will not.

"We have treated hundreds of

patients over the years," he says. "When you lose a patient, it's very upsetting. But the same day, a patient who was supposed to have died five years ago might bring in a baby. I get a lot of energy from the patients."

A Frisbee sails out of nowhere, glancing off of Wilbur's knee. His leg collapses and his face contorts in mock pain while a boy laughs 20 feet away. Wilbur stoops, picks up the disc and sends it arcing upward into clean, blue sky.

The Children's Cancer Research Institute is a non-profit organization at Pacific Presbyterian Medical Center, 2351 Clay St., San Francisco 94115.