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June 2015, over a decade ago, but one of the most important months of my life. Large duffle bags embroidered with my name on them filled my living room. Blue and white t-shirts, tennis rackets, and every color tutu in stock at my local PartyCity. I was getting ready to leave, for an entire summer, with absolutely no idea what was in store. The morning had come and I was leaving. The lump in my throat was overpowered by the chaos in my house. Gathering all the last minute things, taking the classic “my first summer at camp” photo, and finally saying goodbye. It was a goodbye to the comfort of my past. Knowing the next day I wouldn’t be waking up at home, with my family, or my routine. It was time to go, I had to leave and embark on this new adventure.

Driving into this normally vacant and oddly large parking lot felt intimidating. Large coach buses lined up, kids cheering, staff directing everyone where to park. It felt like everyone had their place besides me. I sat in my seat feeling queasy and unsure if I even wanted to open the car door. Stepping foot out of the car made it feel real that I was leaving. Older kids in matching tank tops cheering “CITS” and everyone acting like they were one massive happy family confused me. 500 people? All cheering the same things? I felt like my parents signed me up for a cult. But, despite my hesitations, I got on that bus. It was a windy road to a place unknown. As I got off the bus signs flew with cheering and laughing filling the sky.

Walking into the so-called dining hall to get our bunk assignments only made the pit in my stomach bigger. I sat down quietly and glanced around the room. “Bunk Two: Ashleigh,

Lindsay, Ally, Jewel, Phoebe...". This random group of girls and I got up, lugged our donut backpacks, and walked towards the Bunk. We followed these counselors into a foreign bunk and found the bed with the bedding I picked out months before. Sitting down on this small bunk bed felt weird. Walking into dinner in a massive dining hall filled with older kids. It felt like everyone had known each other forever. That first night I laid on my uncomfortable bed listening to the older kids excited for their first night of the summer. Until it was 2 in the morning and I heard dry heaving in the bathroom. "Ew" is exactly what I thought to myself. I questioned my decision to go to the camp at that very moment.

I pulled on my hardtail shorts and malibu sugar tank top and was ready to conquer my first day at camp. The dining hall was finally quieter, maybe because those crazy older kids were still asleep. The pancakes were in the middle of the table on a tray, great I thought to myself, I hate pancakes. Thankfully this nice short dark haired girl made me toast. She said it was her 9th summer, so she probably knew how to use the weird camp toasters. The contrast between the blazing heat from the sun to the cold pool was refreshing. I tried new activities like cooking and fishing, it all felt new, but fun. In between activities we walked everywhere as a group. Across fields that felt as if they went on forever, past tennis and basketball courts, and the lake. My legs were aching, but I didn't care because I was just excited to take it all in. That night we shared candy at the canteen, braided each other's hair, and washed up for bed together. It felt awkward but right at the same time. As I laid in my bed that night I felt like I belonged. Other girls felt homesick and scared too. I felt like I had found my summer home.

Camp life began to feel like my new routine. I knew what time breakfast was and where to find my favorite yogurt. I knew that if you lined up first for the canteen cards you would get the best frozen Charleston Chew. Full camp gatherings looking at the lake became a ritual I

looked forward to. Those older kids that intimidated me, began to talk to me. I think it was because they knew the same girl who made me the toast. She was what seemed to me the “camp pro”. She cheered me on during all of my new endeavors like my first time up the rockwall. Meals soon became times to cheer, often singing “Quiet please dedicated to...” signifying a new camp couple. Yes, we were seven but thought this was a big deal. Late night conversations in the bunk became recaps of our days, shower hour became performances in our gummy bear decorated robes, and suddenly the casual daily activities became fun - no matter how boring the task normally is. I began to realize I wasn’t surviving at camp, but I was thriving.

As that first summer began to come to a close I put camp into a new perspective. I was so grateful to have something that I would miss so dearly. The sunsets seemed even more beautiful, hugs with friends felt tighter. Even casual moments like sitting on the bunk porch or a night at the canteen felt even more sacred. On the last night that special counselor who immersed me in the camp spirit wrote us a special letter. To this day, I keep that letter in my closet, as it is one of the most important keepsakes of mine. She shaped camp for me, reminding me not to sweat the little things, and to always be a good friend and even better example to those below me.

Flash forward a decade. I became that “CIT” that I once looked up to. I did everything younger me dreamed of. I made the best friends of a lifetime, who I still talk to each and every day. At the end of each summer the entire camp is divided into two teams, blue and white. Being a “CIT Captain” during this is the biggest honor a camper could receive. As a young camper I never anticipated that to be me. I felt like I was just another ordinary camper. Growing older, I took every opportunity at camp to prove myself and be the best version of myself. So, as the August days of camp approached, so did the color war talk. These conversations are comparable

to political conversations during a presidential election. This talk made me anxious as my dreams were either coming true or being crushed in the nearing days. So, when the whole camp was gathered for a special light show, then the papers flew, my stomach went to shambles. “Your name, it's bolded on the papers” shouted my friend, Molly. I screamed, spit my gum out on the floor, and even lost my left shoe in the chaos. The waterworks began, I had achieved my dream.

Despite accomplishing all the goals I had for myself as a camper, I knew my journey wasn't done. Now, I was part of the other side, “staff”. Getting campers of my own gave me a new point of view. Now, it wasn't all about me, but about giving them the experience I was given. They soon enough became my little sisters. The friends that I made when I was seven, they “outgrew” camp. For me, I have yet to get that feeling. I've been introduced to new people from all over the world. Altering my perspective on making friends that are different from me. Seven year old me would have never expected myself to befriend the British counselors. But, at eighteen years old, I cherished those friendships with those who were brought up differently than I. Camp isn't just about soccer games or campfires. It is about the relationships you form and maintain no matter how far the distance. Each time I drive away from camp and it fades into the distance I press my forehead against the cool glass window. I just want to get one last look each time. The version of me that was smaller than her duffle bag and nervous to make friends was left behind.

Camp taught me to be brave. I learned how to turn strangers into lifelong friends. I learned that it's okay to feel scared - that's the best way to flourish. Tyler Hill was no longer just a place, but a home.