

Lifestyle

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Cancer patients enjoy relaxation and camaraderie at weekend camps

A place of hope offered to cancer patients and those dear to them by Camarillo foundation

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Photos courtesy of Miles Johnson and Carlos Galan Rose and Louie Martinez of Ventura, who attended Camp Keepsake initially as campers, now serve as volunteers at the gatherings.

Lynn Peraza had been diagnosed with breast cancer when she first attended Camp Keepsake, a family-style gathering for adult cancer patients and survivors at Camp Mount Craggs in Malibu Canyon.

Today, she is on the board of directors of the Camarillo-based Cancer Hope Foundation, which sponsors the camp that allows cancer patients, including some in remission, and their families to spend time away from the hectic and often stressful routine of doctor visits and treatments.

Camp Keepsake 2008

This year, with a sports theme, the camps will take place the weekends of Sept. 26-28 and Oct. 3-5 at Camp Mount Crags in Malibu Canyon. The application deadline is Aug. 1. For more information or an application, call 384-5445 or visit

www.cancerhopefoundation.org/Camp08.htm



One of the more popular camp activities at Camp Keepsake is the interactive drum circle, where campers share the fun and energy by the campfire.

"You know everyone is there because of some form of cancer, but cancer is not the primary focus," said Peraza 54, of Camarillo, whose cancer is in remission.

"The primary focus is for family and friends to get away in a serene environment where they can relax, enjoy each other and have new experiences that they may not have an exposure to again."

Peraza is among many Ventura County residents reaping emotional and spiritual benefits from Camp Keepsake, which offers cancer patients and up to five guests a free weekend of networking, building friendships and learning more about cancer-related topics.

"Camp Keepsake allows people who are fighting an uphill battle to enjoy a little bit of paradise for a short time right in their own backyard," Peraza said. "It is difficult to believe that you are so close to civilization when you are at camp. It is so peaceful and secluded."

There is an unexplainable magic that happens at Camp Keepsake, said Dr. Christopher Roos of Newbury Park, camp founder and president.

"It is a place to laugh, cry and embrace life together," said Roos, adding that for some campers, the short vacation is as important as receiving medical treatments. "Many campers arrive to camp as strangers on Friday afternoon. By Saturday morning they are friends. By Sunday, people seem to feel an incredible sense of connectedness, as if everyone is one large family."

The Cancer Hope Foundation's necessity lies within its charter of targeting adult cancer patients and its inclusion of the caregivers, family and friends, Roos said.



Photos courtesy of Miles Johnson and Carlos Galan Volunteers Emelio Radocchia and Roberto Branco provide mealtime background music at Camp Keepsake.

"Most cancer camps benefit children dealing with cancer. We understand that if an adult has cancer, it also affects their spouse and children. Similarly, a friend may drive the patient to treatments or to pick up prescriptions or assist in a multitude of other facets. The Cancer Hope Foundation is committed to making the camp experience a very positive one for everyone involved."

Many ways to participate

Patients, their families and friends connect in a memorable way, Roos said.

"They can take pictures enjoy spa-type amenities such as massages, facials and manicures," he said. "They can develop a network of support from others, including other patients, their families and friends, who may be going through similar experiences, and have a need or desire to share their innermost feelings and emotions in a safe and comfortable environment."

Each year the camp has a different theme. In previous years, there has been a Hollywood theme, featuring visits from entertainers including Taylor Dayne, Amy Smart and Sara Gilbert; and an island theme, featuring reggae music and tropical decorations. This year, there is a sports theme; among other things, Roos said, noteworthy sports professionals will visit.

In addition, the camp offers specialized discussions on topics including what to expect from certain types of chemotherapy, special diets and how family and friends can help. Campers also can take camp time to get personal matters in order and, sadly, if needed, say their goodbyes to loved ones they might not see on a regular basis, Roos said.

"By allowing the patient or survivor to bring five guests of their choice, no matter what their age, we believe we can truly support not only the patient but also their close loved ones, whether they be family or friends," he said.

Adult focus is a rarity

Board member and volunteer Dianne Carlson of Oxnard Shores said Camp Keepsake is the only camp she knows of that caters specifically to adults living with cancer.

"There are a few for children, but not for adults," said Carlson. "Dr. Roos started Camp Keepsake after having two very close people in his life lose their lives to cancer. As he sat in hospital rooms watching visitors come and go, he envisioned a place that family and friends could visit that was not a hospital atmosphere, and so Camp Keepsake was born."

It uses the Camp Mount Craggs facility by arrangement with the Salvation Army, which owns it. With its primary draw from Ventura County, the camp does accept people from all over Southern California and out of state.

"We do our absolute best to not turn anybody down," Roos said.

Cancer patients learn about the camp "through their doctors' offices and hospitals; we send out brochures," Roos said. "We do a lot of PSAs (public service announcements). To be honest, we're not sure where everyone hears of us."

Regardless where they come from, the important point is that they come.

The first camp in 2001 had 33 campers. It has grown each year and, by 2007, "we had to put on two camps to accommodate all the applicants — just under 100 for the first session and just over 100 for the second session," Carlson said. "We had a previous camper who lives in Northern California, and the family was so impressed that they are starting a camp and modeling it after us."

Weekends are busy, free

The camps — one in September this year and one in October — may be brief, but they are highly effective, Roos said.

"We fundraise all year round in order to put on the cost-free camp," he said. "It is definitely worth it. It really can change people's lives."

It revolves around positive activity, Peraza said, including various crafts, spa, hiking, exercise, dance, entertainment and eating.

"You almost need to take a vacation to recover if you try to do everything," she said, adding that volunteers make sure campers feel like kings and queens for the weekend. "As a camper you feel special, but the cancer victim or survivor is never singled out. At times it is difficult to determine who has cancer."

Peraza was 50 when she first attended camp in 2003. She has since survived two bouts with breast cancer, the second occurrence detected early enough that she did not need to undergo chemotherapy or radiation.

"I did opt to have a double mastectomy the second time, as we detected the cancer at an early stage," said Peraza, adding that she also has a family history of breast and ovarian cancer in women under 50. "This surgery in 2005 was scheduled for two weeks before camp. Knowing that I was going to camp and was going to see all my extended family is what helped me recover very quickly; my surgeon was surprised at the quick recovery."