

Camp Transcend

By Mattie Smith

The first time we drove to family camp, my son was a mess. Halfway there, he asked if we could turn back, or go somewhere else instead. Seeing him so stressed out, I actually considered it. In all honesty, I was a bit nervous myself. I didn't know anyone who had attended this camp before, or anyone else who would be going. Even though my son transitioned two years earlier, we hadn't spent much time around other families with transgender and gender expansive children. But of course, that's why I'd signed us up in the first place; I thought it was important to develop a support network of people who were going through the same thing. So, I drove on, offering lots of reassurance (and a special stop for ice cream).

We arrived a little before dinner to find a large group of families milling around Homet Lodge. We picked up our badges and itineraries. This was the first time I'd ever been asked to add my preferred pronouns beneath my name (which we both thought was pretty cool) and checked into our cabin. As we walked to dinner, I was still wondering if I'd made the right choice; maybe we should've turned around. Both my son and I tend to be shy in new situations, and I'd signed us up to spend the weekend with a hundred strangers? In the *woods*, no less? (My family and I aren't exactly outdoorsy types). Had I lost my mind?

Scanning the mess hall for an available table sent me right back to middle school — I had the same pit in my stomach. We nervously approached a table where a family whose kid looked to be around the same age as my son sat. We all made awkward small talk for a few minutes, then the mother asked, "So when did your son transition?"

And that's when it hit me; most of the people in our lives back home entirely avoid discussing the fact that my son is transgender. I understand the reasons for it; they aren't sure which questions are appropriate, don't want to make us uncomfortable, and probably worry about getting the terminology right. And the truth is, our family doesn't want to talk about it 24/7, either. In fact, in the past two years, it isn't something we think about on a daily (or even weekly) basis anymore. I've long since stopped thinking of my child as a girl.

But to be asked in such a straightforward manner, without the usual undercurrent of compassion (or occasionally, pity) was incredibly refreshing. It felt like I released a breath I didn't even know I was holding. While our boys ate and chatted, eventually running off to play ping pong, we discussed all the challenges most parents don't ever have to consider: how did we handle sleepovers and school overnights? Had we seen an endocrinologist yet? Was my son out at school, or stealth? It was such a relief to be open with people who truly understood.

In the first panel the following morning, after being broken down by our children's ages, I sat with a group of parents and talked about our journey. Throughout the weekend other panels focused on more specific issues: stealth vs. out, gender specific panels, and more. Later, there was archery, hiking, s'mores by the campfire, and one of the best talent shows I've ever seen. My son ran around with a pack of kids close to his age and in that

group, no one cared who was transgender, a cisgender sibling, (identifying with their assigned gender at birth), or gender expansive. It was such a joy to watch every kid at camp find their niche. The teenagers claimed a table in the dining hall where they spent hours cracking each other up; the younger kids made endless craft projects and played basketball. They all got a chance to just be themselves. For most, that was a welcome break from an outside world that's never as accepting as it should be.

One of the best parts of the weekend was something I hadn't even anticipated. Many of the volunteers running the camp were transgender men and women. And they were some of the most wonderful, generous, funny, and kind people I've ever met — fantastic role models for any child, no matter how they identified. My son came up to me at one point and asked if his favorite male counselor was trans. When I said yes, he said, "And he's married, right? That pretty woman is his wife? But she's not trans, is she?" "No, she isn't," I said. He sat there for a minute thinking, then said, "That's really cool." And he ran off to play with his friends again.

As I sat there watching him, I couldn't help but think about that morning's discussion group. One of the other parents had started by saying, "When my child came out I didn't know much, so I looked it up online. And when I saw that suicide statistic, it scared me to death." The rest of us just sat there nodding.

Two years earlier I'd also sat up late, reading everything I could find, trying to make sense of why my child was insisting that he was really a boy. And almost immediately, I stumbled across the fact that 42% of gender nonconforming children attempt suicide. And the only thing that "might" change that statistic is acceptance: from their families, from their peers, from society as a whole. The raw terror inspired by that number — 42%, nearly half of the kids who were *exactly* like my son — kept me up the rest of the night. The next day I sat my child down and told him that, no matter what, I loved him, I accepted him just as he was, and we'd figure this out together.

All the parents in our discussion group expressed the same fear; I suspect it was a big part of why we'd come to camp. Meeting these strong and self-assured transgender and gender expansive adults with full and satisfying lives was the best gift that weekend gave to me and my son. I realized that deep down, for the past two years I'd primarily been fearing the future — but they gave us hope.

Our final lunch on Sunday was a teary affair, with everyone hugging and promising to stay in touch. It was hard to persuade my son to get in the car, he was still running around with the kids that he now called his "best friends in the whole wide world." As we pulled out of the driveway, he asked, "Why can't they have family camp every weekend?"

Since then, we've gone back every year. As soon as we see the sign for Camp de Benneville Pines, my son and I both start cheering. And even though 12 months have passed, we always walk back into a room filled with old friends, and we always manage to make new ones. Family Camp is always the highlight of our year. As always, we're counting down the days to April.