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Camp Confidence

Connie Mitchell Updated Mar 14, 2016



Photos courtesy of MCBC

De'Ante Roberts still bears the scars from the scalding water that hit his tender skin when he was only 2 years old. You can see where the water burned him from just below his shoulders to his thighs. Now an 18-year-old preparing to pursue a college degree in international business, Roberts is emphatic that he's not a "victim."

"I'm a burn survivor," he says. That subtle but crucial change in outlook was brought about largely through Roberts' experiences at the Midwest Children's Burn Camp (MCBC), located in the Lake of the Ozarks. "I call the burn camp a miracleworker for burn survivors," he says. Roberts attended the camp each summer from age 6 through 17, an annual experience that he credits with building his confidence and compassion.

"When I was younger and my burns were more visible, I would go to public places like pools, and it would be hard for me to take off my shirt just because I was different from everybody else," he says. "Going to the camp has made me more comfortable with myself." It also gave Roberts important perspective in knowing that he wasn't alone in his situation. In fact, some campers had much more visible and disfiguring scars, and friendships with them are what gave Roberts the ability to look past outward appearances.

St. Louis Fire Department fire captain Larry Conley has served as camp director for the past four years. Known to campers as "Uncle Larry," he rallies a lot of volunteers including firefighters, paramedics, occupational therapists and nurses. "I have worked all positions at the camp, and I think I was selected [as director] because of my empowerment management style and proven dedication to the mission of MCBC," he says. "I've been at camp 14 years now, so I've seen kids become adults. Hopefully, the character nuggets we attempt to instill help as they grow through the years into adults."

Throughout the free weeklong camp, MCBC introduces campers to outdoor pursuits like fishing, canoeing, zip lines, and high and low ropes courses, as well as group activities including a talent show, dance and team building. "All the activities are fun but have intentional learning and character-building elements included," Conley says. "We hope to build personal growth in campers by never letting them forget that who they are inside is way more valuable than the scars on the outside."

About 90 percent of MCBC campers return annually until they "age out," according to Julie Peetz, executive director of Burns Recovered, a nonprofit organization that provides programming and services to assist burn survivors in their recovery. In addition to MCBC, the organization sponsors peer support for burn survivors, a young-adult burn-survivor retreat, and burn-prevention and education programs, as well as provides school re-entry support, treatment programs, housing assistance and scholarships for burn survivors.

"Once they age out, they have to take a year off, and then at age 19 and 20, they can return as counselors-in-training. When they're 21, they can become counselors," Peetz explains. Roberts notes that this is his "off year," but he plans to return for counselor training next year.

Sharing the struggles and issues surrounding burn survivorship creates tight bonds among campers. "It is really a big family atmosphere because the kids know one another over so many years, and they grow up together," Peetz says. "And when new campers join, the veteran campers are so welcoming to them. They love to show new campers around and really look out for one another. Being a burn survivor is pretty unique, and when they get together, there's an instant connection."

Located in central Missouri at Camp Sabra, about 30 percent of MCBC campers are from out of state, according to Peetz. "We provide transportation via chartered buses, and Angel Flight also provides free personal flights for kids who live in isolated areas," she adds. "Also, some fire departments provide transportation for some of the campers, as well." MCBC is the only burn camp in Missouri, though there are others throughout the country, including one near Chicago and another in Colorado.

Burns Recovered also employs a full-time social worker who provides one-on-one counseling for burn survivors. "In addition to being a clinically trained professional, our social worker is also a burn survivor who was burned over 66 percent of his body at the age of 18," Peetz says. "With his combination of clinical and personal experience, he has an amazing connection with other survivors. He spends a significant amount of time at Mercy Hospital St. Louis in the burn unit with newly burned patients. He also works with them through their rehab and transition back to their homes, schools or workplaces."

Funding for MCBC and other Burns Recovered programs comes from tax-deductible donations and fundraisers. On Wed., March 9, at 5:30 p.m. at Neiman Marcus St. Louis, Burns Recovered will host More Than a Fashion Show. Models will be escorted by burn survivors during the show emceed by local newscaster Jasmine Huda, and cocktails and hors d'oeuvres will be provided by a number of area restaurants. Tickets and additional information are available at brsg.org.



Photos courtesy of MCBC

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Connie, a native of St. Charles and graduate of the MU School of Journalism, is a freelance writer and editor who contributes to print and online publications for clients throughout the country. She has one husband, two teenage sons and three cats.

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