

Serving at Camp Agape

by Helen Louis

I am not a “camper”, at least not in the “sleep in a bunk bed, eat camp food, have loads of fun while not being terribly homesick” type of camper. I never did overnight Girl Scout Camp, and we didn’t have Outdoor Science School in the Dark Ages. My only experience with “camp” was as the teacher of 20 8th graders “with attitude” at a marine science camp on Catalina Island. (I don’t plan to repeat that experience.) So I think I surprised myself when I asked my good friend Carol Sekeris, a.k.a. “Nurse Carol”, if I could tag along when she returned to be the camp nurse at Camp Agape in Julian, California over Labor Day weekend. Carol had often spoken about how special the experience was, and I was eager to participate. Camp Agape is an integral part of the “Kids ‘n Cancer” ministry that the Ladies Philoptochos of our Metropolis supports, organizes, and presents. It is the only vacation camp experience that includes the cancer patient as well as his/her parents and siblings. This concept, of course, makes sense since cancer impacts the entire family. There are currently 4 camps in 3 states – California, Oregon and Washington. The camp in Julian, California is the newest site serving San Diego and Imperial Counties, and this is the second year of its operation there. I must confess that as I packed for the weekend as a rookie camper, I thought about the predicted 97+ degree temperatures, no air conditioned buildings, and the holiday weekend, and I was tempted to back out. I would have sadly missed what became a most memorable and inspiring experience. (I also thought about our missionary teams to Tanzania and was embarrassed to think I couldn’t handle 3 days at camp in the California mountains with indoor plumbing and fresh water!)

Carol and I arrived at Camp Agape early Friday morning and quickly settled in our rooms in the infirmary (I was “Nurse Carol’s “ roommate...although I prayed that no one would call on me for any medical assistance beyond “mother’s intuition” or “do you have something for a headache?”) Many of the families had arrived on Thursday night by chartered bus from a meeting point in San Diego. One reason for this is the limited parking space at the camp. More importantly, many of the families would have had no means of transportation of their own to and from the camp. What I learned later (that my middle class mentality had not even considered) is that many of our



Camp Agape families take their cancer patient to and from treatment, and often with other children in tow, BY BUS! Try to imagine waiting for a bus, possibly making one or more changes, often in inclement weather, with a sick child

being treated for cancer. This is reality for many of the families. Thankfully, the Kids 'n Cancer ministry will address this issue in the future and will expand its services beyond Camp Agape. Philoptochos will be awarding a grant to the Emilio Nares Foundation to further its current mission to organize and provide oncology transportation for those families in need.

By mid-day, the remaining families had arrived. With a few exceptions because fathers had to work, families included mothers, fathers, patient and siblings. We had 30 families in all, plus camp staff and volunteers. Families were selected with the help of the Emilio Nares Foundation primarily on the basis of need. Richard Nares established the Foundation in memory of his son Emilio, who lost his fight with leukemia just prior to his sixth birthday. Richard's presence and assistance throughout the weekend were invaluable to the program. Until "family introductions" later that evening, it was difficult to identify patients from siblings. There were the obvious patients with little or no hair, but many of the kids were between treatments or thankfully in remission. Some of the families were returning campers from last year, and were obviously thrilled to be back. One particular camper, a pre-teen named Greg, should go into PR work. He kept saying he was having "a blast!", hanging out with and encouraging new friends, and so appreciative of this time with his family to relax and have fun. That is the essence of Camp Agape. It is a time – unfortunately brief – when families with a child with cancer can try to forget the emotional and financial stress of this devastating disease and simply ENJOY...eating together as a family (I might add the food was very good!), swimming together, doing crafts, hiking, dancing. There was also archery and wall climbing (amazing how

many kids make it to the top of the wall!). Most important, as one very confident teenager camper in remission said, it is a time when the patient can be HIMSELF or HERSELF without “standing out”. It is a time when patients and families can relate experiences... and COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND... those experiences, offer support and encouragement to one another, and forge friendships. It is also a time when mothers and fathers are offered respite, a little time for themselves BY themselves, knowing that their children are engaged in safe, adult-supervised activities. On Friday and Saturday, the Camp Lodge had been transformed into a Day Spa. For a few



hours each day, massage therapists, exercise therapists, and hairstylists had donated their time and equipment to offer massages, relaxation techniques, facials, and haircuts to moms and dads who wanted them (ALL the moms took advantage of this wonderful opportunity!) There was so much gratification as a volunteer just seeing the moms in particular return from their “spa” treatments relaxed and refreshed.

In the evenings, the moms and female volunteers gathered in the Lodge to knit, crochet, and share stories while the kids played ping pong and other games and had snacks. The dads returned to the cafeteria to play cards. During this time, I had the opportunity to sit and talk with one mother whose son was diagnosed with leukemia seven years ago and is still undergoing treatment. When her son first began treatment, she had no choice but to quit her job as a 4th grade teacher to be with him in the hospital. One month later her husband was laid off from his job! At that point, she wondered, “What next??” In addition to the emotional and financial stress, she shared that this ordeal took a toll on their marriage. This is no surprise. Last year she had been unable to come to Camp Agape because she was running a marathon to raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. She said her husband resented the time she was putting into her training, an ideal release for her and a benefit for those fighting leukemia. She related that his coming to camp with the children was extremely beneficial, since it enabled

him to socialize and interact with other dads and gave him a new perspective on their relationship. “Our relationship is actually stronger now,” she said. “I used to be concerned with how much money we needed to make and what we could buy. Now I know that is not what is important.” This year she came alone on Friday with the boys while her husband took their 9th grade daughter to a mandatory volleyball practice. Because neither her daughter nor her husband wanted to miss out on the experience of Camp Agape, they drove up on Saturday to join the rest of their family for just a day! We watched each of them have a wonderful time together and with others. This speaks volumes to the quality of the camp and what it does for the families and for the couples.

Traditionally on Friday evenings at camp, the families gather in the outdoor “auditorium” to introduce each other and “present” their family: who they are, what they enjoy, and what is important to them. Each family had been given a large foam board star (to resemble the stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame since this year’s theme was “Welcome to Hollywood”) to decorate in any way they wish and use in presenting their family to the audience. I had been warned that this was going to be an emotional experience, and indeed it was. Carol and I, as well other volunteers, observed that the majority of the families include a Cross in designing their star and talk about God in their discussion of what is important in their lives. “God is Love”, “Dios es Amor” was written on many of the stars. While some would doubt God’s love under such difficult circumstances, these families offered thanks to Him for protecting their family, and for enabling them to come to Camp Agape. They gave witness to their faith in Him to make their child healthy. Many thanked the Ladies’ Philoptochos as well, for all their work in making the camp experience possible. For so many of the families this is the only vacation they could hope to have. Carol was struck by Katie’s presentation of her family – mom, dad, and 8 of her 9 siblings. A somber, yet articulate, 11 year old who recently went through back surgery and made her way around camp in a wheelchair, she spoke of her family’s values of respect, support, commitment and unity and gave a special thanks to her mom for recognizing something was wrong and “saving her life.” Kevin especially touched my heart when he quietly explained his on-going, seven year treatment for leukemia and poignantly concluded :”and I just want it to go away...” There was also Greg (Mr. PR) and Steve, both in remission, who encouraged their peers to “hang in there” and “it will be OK.” It is so meaningful for kids with cancer and their families to hear words of hope from others who have “been there.” In another family, a sibling introduced

her family members and ended with a casual, “and we are glad that Heather here is still with us”, which brought a few chuckles from the crowd. Then the dad of this family took the microphone. He was a large, burly man with many tattoos. He proceeded to give a sermonette (Father Steve would love this guy!) on the different meanings of the Greek words for “love”, emphasizing that “agape” is “love for love’s sake and that is exactly what Camp Agape is.” It was eloquent to say the least, and Carol and I were reminded that “you can’t judge a book by its cover!”

I have to add that mealtimes at Camp Agape were an event. During each meal raffle tickets were passed out to all the children and two winning tickets were drawn each time. The winners were delighted with the small gifts they were given. Also during meals, EVERY patient and sibling was given a gift....a multi-colored Slinky, a Beanie Baby, toy binoculars...and



the kids loved it, even the 18 year olds! Throughout our stay, families’ pictures were taken in the dining hall and framed as a keepsake of their time at Camp Agape. At lunch on Saturday, each family was given a bag with costumes and props for each member. There were tiaras, glitzy neckties and

eyeglasses, boas, party hats and fabric. Each person was to dress for Saturday night’s “Hollywood Premier”, the final evening event before Sunday’s departure. The camp staff decorated the outdoor basketball court with lights, a red carpet was rolled out leading the way to the “ballroom”, and the DJ arrived to set up his equipment for dancing. Volunteers were stationed at tables to serve sparkling apple cider and snacks. It was amazing to see each member of each family proceed down the red carpet in “formal attire”. The ladies had actually transformed the fabric they were given into “gowns” with impressive creativity. Glow sticks complimented each outfit as the sun set. Everyone danced...to old tunes and new. Ever heard of the “Cha-cha Slide?” I hadn’t, but the all the kids seemed to know it, or they learned it quickly. It was as much fun watching them dance as they were having doing the dancing. There was salsa music also, and I loved watching Reuben’s mom twirl his 5 month old brother around the dance floor while

cuddling him over her shoulder. Toward the end of the evening, Carol approached the DJ and asked if he might have some Greek music, and he did! (Computer technology is wonderful!) We Philoptochos ladies started dancing the Kalamatiano (I think) and soon had a long line of parents and kids following along with us. What an ending to a phenomenal evening for all the families and for us! We agreed that everyone would sleep well that night.



Following breakfast on Sunday morning, we gathered for a “Spiritual Meeting” at the outdoor amphitheater. Our speaker, a cancer survivor herself, led a very Christ-centered discussion while engaging the children and parents. Following this, she told the story of Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, from a book about a young girl who suffers from cancer following the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima in World War II. In Sadako’s memory, her classmates completed her goal of making 1000 origami paper cranes. Our speaker had brought origami paper cranes folded by a friend with cancer and invited each child to come forward and place a paper crane on an evergreen tree. During the service, we became aware that one of our teenagers, a young girl I called the “Lady in Pink” was not in attendance. I named her the “Lady in Pink” because of her fondness for pink and black in her wardrobe: pants, shirt, headband, and accessories. She wore them all with style. We learned that she was crying and refusing to come out of her

room because she did not want to leave Camp Agape. Her mother shared that since she was diagnosed, she had become depressed and didn't want to go anywhere. She was miserable because, as a teenager with cancer and undergoing treatment, she didn't feel that she "fit in" with her peers. A call from



her father finally persuaded our "Lady in Pink" to join us. When she came to the gathering, she carried one of the "Hollywood Stars" with a letter of thanks she had designed and gave it to Jeannie Ranglas. I was told that in the letter she expressed her gratitude for being able to come to Camp Agape and to be "constantly surrounded by love." She said she finally felt "normal" here. Another triumph for what Camp Agape can do for kids with cancer!

We all traveled over to the camp lodge for "Closing Ceremonies". Each patient received a "gold medal" and accepted the framed picture of his or her family taken at the beginning of the weekend. We then watched a remarkable photo presentation that two of Jeannie's volunteers had stayed up most of the night to put together to be shown that morning.. Thousands of photos had been taken by a newspaper photographer who took his vacation time to come to Camp Agape and take pictures of every family and every event for the entire weekend. It was a beautiful tribute to the happiness that the campers and their families were able to experience.

As we left the lodge to pack up Carol's car to leave, we stopped to say goodbye to campers along the way. The bus had arrived to take families back to San Diego and everyone left quickly to assemble their belongings to load on the bus. My only regret is that I did not get a chance to hug everyone one of those precious children, their siblings and their parents, to wish them well, and tell them we would continue to pray for their recovery and strength. We pray that each one will return to Camp Agape next year and announce that they are in remission, to encourage patients and families who have only begun their battle with this dreadful disease. Sadly, this is not always the case.

This article would not be complete without acknowledging the tireless efforts of Jeannie Ranglas, Kids 'n Cancer Chairperson, and her team of Philoptochos volunteers from Cardiff-by-the-Sea: Dolly, Toni, Virginia and Alexis. They are incredible women. Led by Jeannie, the Philoptochos “Energizer Bunny” (she NEVER stops moving!) these ladies worked from morning until night with smiles on their faces and love in their hearts at all times. Jeannie was responsible for all the purchasing (an overwhelming task) and scheduling of activities, and her team helped complete all the tasks. Carol and I filled in where we were needed. Other incredible coordinators who worked along side Jeannie were Richard, Luz, Andreas, Laurie, and our wonderful photographer.

If I had to sum up my experience at Camp Agape, I would have to say it was “joyous”, perhaps a paradoxical statement when describing an event involving children and families dealing with cancer. Camp Agape IS joy in the midst of sadness; in the midst of juggling family, job, and treatments; in the midst of emotional and financial strain; in the midst of fear that you will lose your child. It is joyous to see these children and their families just relax and have fun. It is also a proud moment knowing that Camp Agape happens because of our Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos charity. We at St. Paul’s contribute generously to this worthy outreach through our “Festival of Hearts” fund raising event. When you support this event, you become part of the joy. Make it a joyous happening for yourself and kids with cancer. Besides donating your time, talents or treasure to this event, consider making a visit to Camp Agape for a day or a few hours. It’s worth every dollar and every minute!



Helen Louis (center) with her husband Chris and daughters Theresa and Catherine