

## CAMP TA-KUM-TA VERMONT

Interview with Dennis DePaul: Camp Director

### **What kind of programs do you offer for patients, siblings, and/or families?**

Camp Ta-Kum-Ta is a year round camping experience for children between the ages of 7 and 17 who have or had cancer and are from Vermont or treated in Vermont. We are part of a large network of oncology camps globally called the Children's Oncology Camping Association International ([www.cocai.org](http://www.cocai.org)). At Camp Ta-Kum-Ta ([www.takumta.org](http://www.takumta.org)), we offer camping experiences for children in the cancer journey and their entire families. Our programs include traditional camping experiences for the summer and winter, a siblings program, a mom's weekend, and an annual reunion celebration. We have our own ropes course, a beautiful pool (shaped like a "T" for Ta-Kum-Ta), athletic fields, mountain bike trails (100+ acres), and countless activities including arts and crafts, athletics, cooking, dances (including a prom-like event), holiday specific parties, and more. During the winter months, we have cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, night hikes, and our own ice skating rink - broom ball is our favorite game on the ice!

### **What is your favorite part of camp?**

Camp TKT is heaven on earth! Because every child has cancer (or is in remission), the focus shifts away from their illness and children are once again just kids. We create a loving and safe environment where our children and their families can explore the realities of their cancer journey while still allowing the beautiful spirit of who they are to shine. I am often asked "isn't it a sad place?" Very simply, NO. It is the happiest, most life affirming place I have ever experienced.

### **How many years have you had camp?**

Camp Ta-Kum-Ta has existed for a long time! We have been changing lives for 31 years (founded in 1984). We are fully funded through donations and our programs are run by volunteers.

### **What are the campers' favorite activities?**

There are so many! I think they truly love our "formal/prom" held during our traditional summer one-week program. With the generosity of our amazing community, we have hundreds of beautiful dresses, tuxedos, and suits. Each summer, we have 2-3 seamstresses who volunteer their time and fit the formal wear to our children's bodies (due to their treatment regimens, the body size often changes). So for one night each summer, they shine like the brightest stars in the sky! Our amazing Special Activities Team creates a magical environment for the evening that includes a formal dinner followed by a dance party.

### **What are the dates for camp and what is this year's theme (if applicable)?**

Our traditional summer program will be July 26 - August 1. Our theme this year is "Game On" where we will be involved in friendly competitive activities all week (athletics, board games, costume parties, etc.)



### **What makes your camp unique?**

**OUR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES:** We work with a very special population of children. I am so thankful to our parents for sharing their children with us knowing that for some, time is precious.

**OUR STAFF:** All of our camp staff are volunteers with roughly a 90% return rate every year. Roughly 25% of our staff are prior campers that survived their cancer and many have been with us for all 30 years. In addition, our outstanding volunteers come from ALL OVER the United States at their own expense. They create the magic and I am inspired by their commitment, creativity, and generosity!

**OUR FACILITY AND PROGRAMS:** Nestled on the hillside of South Hero (an island in Lake Champlain), our facility is fully accessible and we consider differing ability in all our programs and activities. We work with children in all phases of their treatment. Our exceptional medical staff administers everything from band aids to chemo at camp!

### **Favorite camp memory?**

Again, there are so many amazing memories. I remember one year we brought hot-air balloon rides to camp. We had one camper, Genina, in a wheel chair who was close to the end of her life and was more-or-less unable to participate in most of our activities (she was unable to even lift her arms). I asked the balloon folks to blow up the balloons just outside of her cabin. I could see her peeking through the window. Once they were blown up, she asked to speak with me - I happily went to her cabin. She wanted to know if she could be lifted into the balloon basket for a tethered ride. I said, "OF COURSE!" We wheeled her to the balloon basket, set a folding chair in it for her to sit on and we gently lifted her up. Then woosh - we rose into the sky - Genina was smiling like a sunflower on a bright sunny day. Because Genina was so small (12 years old) she was unable to see over the side of the basket so she asked if it was ok for her to stand (I was shocked). So I turned to the other counselor in the basket with us to ask if she would help me lift her. While I was asking, this enormous cheer and clapping came from the ground. I turned around and Genina had magically pulled herself up and was standing at the edge of the basket waving to everyone below. As we fought back our own tears, we waved madly at the amazing community below and smiled brightly. It was truly a spectacular moment filled with hope and healing for all of us. I will forever be grateful for Genina and her amazing spirit.

### **Anything else you'd like to share?**

Our name story! In the first year of Camp, our founders, Ted & Deb Kessler and Sheara Bilado, were talking with the children about naming our program. One of the youngest girls, Natasha, was painfully shy and really didn't know what to say. Ted loves to tease the kids so kept pushing her in a fun way and finally Natasha said, "I don't know Ted, it's just the camp 'ta-come-ta.'" Thus, Camp Ta-Kum-Ta was born!

[www.takumta.org](http://www.takumta.org)

