

Chameleon's Journey Reaches a Milestone

Celebrating 10 Years of Caring and Support

BY NICOLE HARGROVE VANDENBOSCH

Ten years ago, Charlotte's Rob Carter approached Larry Dawalt of Hospice of Mecklenburg County with the idea of establishing a grief camp in Charlotte for children who have experienced the death of a loved one. Carter's nephews had attended Camp Dragonfly in Virginia after his brother had passed away. Seeing how much the children benefitted from this camp made him notice that there is a huge need for this kind of support in the Charlotte community. Dawalt agreed with Carter and the weekend camp, Chameleon's Journey, hosted annually at Camp Thunderbird for children ages 7 to 16 was born.

The name Chameleon's Journey comes from the story of a chameleon whose colors kept changing with his changing emotions after losing a dear friend. The story explains that it is completely acceptable to feel like you are not in control of your emotions at times and that it is okay to feel a range of emotions from anger and sadness to joy and happiness. Through the story of the chameleon's journey, children realize they are not abnormal for having many different and conflicting feelings all in the same day.

The Chameleon's Journey program has remained largely unchanged since its inception 10 years ago. "We have tried to be consistent with combining teaching with opportunities for the children to get to know one another," says Dawalt.

"They need a really safe and caring environment, and we have tried to focus on this." Even though the format remains largely the same from year to year, the curriculum does get changed, so that returning children can experience new things. Activities include crafts, sharing exercises, camp events, such as zip-line and rock wall climbing, and memorials for lost loved ones. Participants make t-shirts every year for the camp, and this year they tie-dyed them in colors that symbolize hope and love.

Junior League of Charlotte, Inc. (JLC) Chameleon's Journey Committee Chair Heather Obleada says one of the special parts of being a chair is the behind the scenes access to the planning of the camp. "It is a year-long process with

Hospice of Charlotte that includes attending meetings; which is nice because otherwise you show up and feel like everything is already done."

JLC Volunteer Evelyn Hagood recalls the highlight of her experience at this year's camp: "My favorite moment was when this little eight-year-old girl was attempting to climb up the tower for the zip-line. She was really scared so we kept encouraging her to go up and face her fears. The guy managing the zip-line yelled up to his friend in the tower, 'Hey can you put it on 'slow' for her?' And he said, 'Yes, we'll put it on slow.' The girl agreed to go down the zip line, and ran back up to tell all her friends that it wasn't that scary especially if they put it on 'slow.' That same little girl who was so scared to go down the zip line karaoked to Lady Gaga in front of the entire camp. She even threw in some dance moves. It was hilarious!"



Three-year veteran of the Chameleon's Journey Committee, Ansley Cheatham, loves her placement in the Teenagers Group. "It definitely stays with you throughout the year even though it's only one weekend. You can't help but fall in love with it and know that you're witnessing something sacred," says Cheatham. "Kids who feel isolated in their loss can come to camp and share experiences and pain, and not feel like the only one in the world

who is dealing with it." One of the activities that Cheatham finds most touching is when the campers write letters to loved ones. They then put these letters in a fire during the memorial ceremony, and it "looks like letters to heaven." Campers and counselors alike experience a range of emotions during the weekend. Hagood stresses that while there are moments of sadness, camp is an uplifting experience for these children. Hagood says, "The camp is fun! Children who are complete strangers from one another are able to share the major, impactful losses they have experienced. They can relate to one another and have a weekend to remember their loved ones. They also learn that it's okay to be happy and have a good time even though they lost a friend or family member."



Chameleon's Journey Journal:

Camp through the eyes of JLC Volunteer Melanie Cranford*

I got home about an hour ago and I am completely physically and emotionally drained. These are my notes written down as the moments presented themselves, and I felt led to do so.

Walker: We had only been at camp for a couple of hours when Walker tugged at my sleeve. I looked down at him as he asked in an innocent child's voice, "Can I tell you how my mommy died?" I was taken back a little, as we were surrounded by at least 100 people, and there was noise all around us as kids were talking and playing. I looked into his desperate little green eyes and nodded. *I felt my eyes well up with tears. I knew the weekend was going to be tough...* Walker asked me to read the letter he'd written to his mother for the memorial service, to be held later tonight. I took the letter from his tiny hands and unfolded it. I read to myself silently Walker's words,

Dear Mommy, I am trying to be strong like you asked me to be. Daddy says you would be so proud of me, and that you are watching me from Heaven, so I need to be strong and keep a brave face. *Again my eyes filling up with tears, so badly I could hardly read the last line of the letter.*

P.S. Daddy is so sad, he misses you a lot.

Maggie: At the memorial service the children each go up one by one and place a self decorated lit candle on the stage ledge. We are seated on the cold bench now, and I am holding Maggie trying to console her as she cries. She looks at me and says, "I miss my daddy." I hug her closer and whisper in her ear that it is okay to miss him and it is also okay to cry for him. She nods her head and buries it deeper into my shoulder, and I notice a small little girl in the bench in front of us with her tiny arm wrapped around another child. The first little girl looks back at me with tears

streaming down her face and sees me crying also. She sniffles and begins to rub the back of her friend as they cry together. *I think to myself they must be 7 years old. I think about how strong the first little girl must be and how fragile the entire innocent scene looks.*

Ellis: Eleven year-old Ellis and I are walking back to the teaching cabin after breakfast and some of the other kids are running ahead laughing. As I watch and think how carefree they seem, Ellis says to me, "I see my cousin up there at his cabin. It was his dad that died, my uncle. So we are here for the same person." I ask him if his cousin told him about camp, and if the two of them are close. Ellis says, "Yes. He is more like a little brother to me than a cousin. I go to his house almost every day to try to help his mother. She has two babies plus my cousin and she is really struggling." *I imagine his aunt and her three children alone and scared without their father.*

Cara: Cara and I are walking together from the dining hall and she looks up at me and says, "My mom was really young when she died. She would have been 31 this year." I look at her shocked, as I realize I am only a few years away from this age. I shudder in the cold as Cara runs ahead to walk with a friend. *I think about how sad it would be to have a child and then find out I had a terminal illness. How cheated Cara must feel to have lost her mother when she was so young.*

The following are quotes from the children in my group, ages 10-12 years old. I read these out loud in the parent presentation on Sunday:

- "I learned that there are people I can talk to instead of hiding out."
- "I learned that I am not the only one at camp or in the world who has lost someone, and that my uncle is watching over me from a better place."
- "I learned I can cry in front of other people, and it is okay."
- "It's okay to talk to someone about my feelings and cry a little, because others have lost a family member and they can listen."
- "I know my uncle is up there watching over me, when I need him he is still there. I never thought about him like that until this camp weekend."

I realized that many people experience loss and we all grieve in different ways. These children were so very strong and they inspired me to go to work on Monday with a renewed outlook. I told myself, "I have been given this day to do with it what God will allow me to do. I can use it for good and choose to make people smile, and overall to be more thankful for the very gift of one more day."

I keep thinking if these young kids can get up and go to school today and put on a strong face, then you bet I can do that too! 🍌

**The first names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.*