

# **My First Experience as a Camp Nurse**

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**Abstract:** A nurse describes her first experience as a summer camp nurse. She shares the reasons she was looking for a change from her NICU work, how she reviewed camps and made contacts about positions, and how she landed her first job. Preparing for the role change, her experiences, and what she learned from the summer are shared candidly and realistically.

During the summer of 2005, I laughed harder than I ever had in my entire life. For three months straight. Welcome to my first experience as a camp nurse.

## **The Stimulus for Change**

Although I attended camps as a child and had positive experiences each time, I would never have fancied myself as a "campy" person who would aspire to work at one someday. However, after being an RN for only four years, my passion for this incredible career was already starting to smolder. I had been working 12-hour night shifts at one of the country's largest neonatal intensive care units. The exhaustion of the long hours coupled with the intense emotional and spiritual wear that such a job can bring had long caught up with me. It was definitely time for a change.

Being single and having no concrete commitments in the area where I was gave me the opportunity to explore options that I would not otherwise have. Being a nurse presents so many amazing opportunities to be creative in demonstrating your gifts and abilities. I wanted an adventure and an opportunity to demonstrate my skills in an environment outside of the hospital. For some reason, the idea of being a camp nurse was laid in my heart, and once it took root the excitement of such a prospect quickly grew.

## **Starting My Search**

I got on the Internet, found the ACA website, and purchased the annual guide listing ACA accredited camps. What an excellent resource! I had in mind the type of place I envisioned--either by water or mountains, working with a general population of children having a super camp experience. I envisioned cabins, campfires, and crazy games. I hoped to find a camp that would provide clean private accommodations and a salary. I was not in a position to volunteer my time for three months! From the ACA guide I compiled a list of camps that seemed to fit my criteria and began to visit camp websites. The web sites were very helpful and a good website was very helpful. Pictures of the camp and accommodations, general descriptions of the activities, staff members, and mission statements were very valuable. I then narrowed my list down to about twenty camps in Colorado and on the west coast.

Optimistically, I started in September making one phone call after another. I thought, "Well, just how easy will this be? Who would turn down an experienced nurse who is willing to quit her job and move to camp for a whole summer?" The reality was that many camps I contacted use a camper's parent as the nurse in exchange for the child being able to attend the camp for free. Some attempted to discourage me from "giving up my whole summer like that." Many simply did not return my phone calls. I did not know then that many camp directors are taking badly-needed time off in September, which is when I was beginning this process.

## **Landing a Job**

Of the twenty or so camps I contacted, only one expressed immediate interest and initiated the hiring process. Unfortunately, the plan fell through. In December, out of the blue, I had a phone message from Mary Marugg at Sonlight Christian Camp in southern Colorado: "Jenny? I'm so sorry it took so long for us to get back to you. I received your message about being a camp nurse this summer and we would love to have you." Within hours I spoke with Mary and knew in my heart it was a perfect fit—a small, simple Christian camp in the mountains whose staff had longed to have a nurse on board who was young and able to provide services for the entire summer.

At first I thought, "Woo-hoo! What a job! Singing! Campfires! Games! Mountains!" And then my excitement morphed into all-out fear—snakebites, asthma attacks, allergies, broken bones, homesickness! I was not equipped to handle these things. What was I going to do outside of the safe, sterile clinical environment? My familiar supports were not going to be available. I would not be able to just page a nurse practitioner or doctor and expect them to show up in a few minutes. I would no longer have a fleet of respiratory therapists at my disposal, or a pharmacy. What on earth was I thinking?

## **Getting Ready**

Ah, what little credit we nurses can sometimes give ourselves for the unbelievable wealth of knowledge stored in our minds, for the critical thinking skills that define our competence and ability to practice. Mary quelled my fears with reassurance that I would never be alone (she herself is an RN and numerous staff members are certified in Wilderness First Aid or are EMTs). She guided me in the direction of some excellent resources to prepare myself. She sent me Erceg and Pravda's book, *The Basics of Camp Nursing* and I purchased a Wilderness First Aid text. I spoke with other nurses who had camp nursing experience. Sonlight Christian Camp hosted a NOLS Wilderness First Aid course and paid for my attendance. That was an awesome opportunity. Not many nurses have a chance to learn how to apply traction on a broken limb using t-shirts, ski poles, and a Nalgene bottle.

## **At Camp**

Never did I imagine, as I was elegantly pinned after receiving my BSN in 2001, that I would head to parts unknown to...live in a trailer...in the middle of nowhere...and have absolutely no privacy...and find that to be the height of my nursing career to date. Being a camp nurse was absolutely stunning. Stunning sometimes in the sense that I had no idea it could be so much fun. And stunning other times because I had no idea camp nursing could be so time-consuming and stressful. In many ways, it was not all so different from working in the hospital: I still had mountains of paperwork and documentation. I dealt with difficult kids and/or families. I had to multitask and prioritize and constantly make sure I was a step ahead in case something happened and left me twelve steps behind. I carried a two-way radio that was strangely akin to the eternally frustrating call light that never stops ringing.

I also had a chance to interact with my "patients" and give them a view of nursing that perhaps they have never seen. When I was not fulfilling a nursing duty I filled other roles so they would not simply identify me as "Nurse Jenny to whom I go when I am hurt." I danced with them during morning energizers, attended teaching and worship with them, sang with them at campfire, and encouraged them up the climbing wall. The older campers caught on to the fact that nursing skills and knowledge transcend hospital walls and that nurses come in forms other than in scrubs or the stereotypical white dress

and cap. As one camper asked on check-in day, "You're the nurse? Aren't nurses supposed to be old and smell like preservative?" No, nurses are smart and vibrant and belong in a variety of settings. And some even wear hiking shoes.

### **What I Learned**

What surprised me the most was how much I fell back on my experience and skills that had been honed over the past few years as a medical-surgical and ICU nurse. I came to recognize that "gut instinct" that can only be developed with time and good nursing experience. I have a handful of friends whose first nursing jobs were camp nursing. They performed well, but in retrospect I cannot imagine taking on that kind of responsibility without having experience under my belt. On the most basic of levels, simply having experience with appropriate documentation was a must. Speaking with concerned parents was a lot easier after having vast experience with distraught families in the NICU. Today's children are on an alarming amount of medications – prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal preparations. A nurse with a strong pharmacological background and working knowledge of preparing appropriate dosages for children is needed to make judgments about dispensing meds. In short, an experienced registered nurse is a camp's most valuable resource when it comes to overseeing the health of its population.

Sonlight is a small camp so I did have a lighter load than many camp nurses. Nonetheless, it was surprising how much time and attention the role required. For balance, I learned it was also essential to have sufficient backup and the ability to take some time alone. A half-hour walk without worry of being needed was a treasure. Nurses always need to take care of themselves, in and out of the clinical setting. Camp certainly is no exception. Being out of the clinical environment does not necessarily make it easier!

Camp nursing is really no different from hospital nursing in that your role is always shifting. In the hospital I wear countless hats: nurse, social worker, encourager, spiritual mentor...sometimes the janitor (GI floor, quadriplegic, bowel prep with GoLyteLy. Enough said!). At camp, I wore even more hats. I was nurse and "mom" to the boy who had a horrible fever and cough and had to spend the better part of the week sleeping on my couch. I was nurse and confidante to the girls who had personal questions on their minds. I was nurse and teacher to the young girl who had her first menstruation at camp. There were the kids who had repeated complaints and I had to determine what was really going on. A camper who stands out most in my mind was a little girl who had one vague complaint after another, and along with her friends created quite the drama about each one. I finally spoke with her alone and found out that she was very worried about her parents who were on a mission trip in Budapest. This was the farthest away from her that they ever had been. We finally agreed that what was really hurting was her heart, and instead of inventing reasons to seek my attention all she had to do was come to me for a hug. Times like that just touched my heart.

### **Is This My Job?**

It was striking how many times I exclaimed to myself, "I can't believe this is my job!" I'm eating dinner wearing a sombrero. I'm laughing hysterically during the campfire. I have a crowd of teenagers in my trailer who just want to hear me talk in my funny Midwest accent. I'm setting up a campsite in the wilderness. I'm white-water rafting in Durango. I'm having the time of my life and I am a nurse. *I can't believe this is my job!*

Jennifer Mark, RN, BSN worked this past summer as the nurse at Sonlight Christian Camp in Pagosa Springs, CO. To that experience she brought background in acute care. She is currently a travel nurse in the Intensive Care Nursery at John Muir Health Care in Walnut Creek, CA...and having the time of her life!