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FRESH AIR FUND

How going to camp gave me back my happiness

By **Anissah Rajpatee** SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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Each week during the campaign, campers and staff from Fresh Air Fund camps will share their memories in their own words. This summer, Anissah Rajpatee, 16, is a counsellor-in-training at YWCA Toronto's Camp Tapawingo.

I cannot remember a summer without camp. I was 6 years old when I first attended YWCA Toronto's Camp Tapawingo — a girls-only camp that offers programs like arts and crafts, sailing, canoeing, mountain biking and swimming, just to name a few — and I've been a camper every year since. This summer, I finally get to be a counsellor-in-training, and I could not be more excited!

It has been such an amazing experience. I have learned so much about who I am as a person.

In 2013, I had a difficult school year and couldn't wait for summer to arrive so that I could go to camp. That summer, I was in cabin "Dew Drop Inn" and it was one of the most memorable years for me. The girls in my cabin became so close and we bonded like never before. We sang a song at the end of that session and dedicated it to our counsellors (because they were just amazing!). In those three weeks, I was able to regain my happiness that was lost during the year.

At camp, you get to learn a lot about leadership — mentoring the younger campers, organizing groups and planning camp-wide activities and special events.

Last summer, I got to plan and go on a two-night canoe trip with my cabin. You would not believe how many memories you can pack into 48 hours. I got to learn interesting things about other people and we bonded over shared experiences. We also had to learn how to work together and find solutions, like when we needed the whole team to successfully put up one of the more problematic tents.

On one of the nights, we were sitting down by the water writing a trip song. It was getting dark so we packed it up and started getting ready for bed. Little did we know that a family of raccoons was waiting in the trees. They were brave little raccoons and decided to scare us ... and believe me, at first it worked! We tried scaring them away by banging pots and blowing whistles but they were stubborn. Eventually, we made it safely into our tents. It was one of those "you had to be there to understand how funny it was" stories, but it was definitely one of the best memories from that canoe trip.

Camp is such a big part of my life. When I'm there, I feel like I can really be myself. The friendships are unique. There are things you can tell camp friends that you cannot tell city friends. Camp makes me feel safe. Lots of girls go through difficult things growing up and camp is a place where you can find yourself. I would not be the person I am today without Camp Tapawingo and all the amazing people I have met along the way.

I definitely look forward to coming back as a counsellor and giving back to this place.

HOW TO DONATE

With your gift, the Fresh Air Fund can help send 25,000 disadvantaged and special-needs children to camp. Our target is \$650,000.

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