

Bet's on it

Volunteer Bet Spence changes lives through Camp COCO

Two years ago, Bet Spence was on a mission to get the “buffs” for the Camp COCO campers to wear — armbands made famous on the CBS television show “Survivor”. The CBS lawyers were resistant to let Spence use part of the “Survivor” logo on the buff. Bet recalls, “I told the lawyer, ‘These children were survivors long before your television show.’” The campers got the buffs.

It's that kind of drive and dedication that has made Spence one of the most beloved volunteers of Camp COCO, a weeklong camp for children with cancer or other blood disorders. Spence is entering her 20th year volunteering for the camp.

“It only takes one person to make a difference in the life of a child. Camp really, really makes a difference for these kids,” she says, smiling. “They're amazing,”

As someone who wears her heart on her sleeve, Spence wasn't sure her heart could handle dealing with sick children. But she was charmed by the magic of the experience. “I get back 10 times what I give,” she says.

She was a swimming instructor the first year and now is activity director, fund-raiser, community speaker, “Anything they want me to do.” (She's already planning the next prank on Dr. Brandt.)

Spence is full of stories about how camp turns “kids with cancer” to just kids.

One little girl forgot her inhibitions by the camp's second day and tossed aside her wig for the week. Another was running without her crutches by the fourth day, holding them out like airplane wings.

“Every year you know that some of these kids won't be back,” Spence says. “I go back for the other kids who need camp just as badly.”

One camper visited Spence when she was working at the Springfield Police Department. The little girl passed by two teenage boys who were waiting to be questioned about some misdeed.

The girl, who had lost her hair to chemotherapy, said to them, “What'd you do?” The boys asked, “What happened to your hair?” She tartly replied, “I've got cancer. You oughta be glad that you're healthy and you're alive and gonna be alive. 'Cuz I won't be in a year.” An employee called Spence later and said, “I think she made a difference. Those boys cried when she left.”

Spence's family has been touched by the magic of COCO, too. Spence's mother learned to cope with cancer with the help of young camper Courtney Spoor. They passed away within one month of each other in 1995.

Spence's daughter, Jennifer, a cancer survivor, visited Spence at Camp and was so moved by the experience that she has changed the course of her career, getting a degree in education. She is now seeking a child life specialist degree. Although Jennifer lives in Florida, she and her young daughter will be back at camp next summer for the third time.

Spence, paired with the magic of Camp COCO and its campers, has helped change lives and enrich lives, from entertainment attorneys to misbehaving teenagers.

“If I ever win the lottery, I won't be rich for long,” she says. “I'll give the money away. And the first thing I'll do is buy land for the camp.” ■

Written by Karen Carlson ●
Photograph by James Hawker