



Camp Kesem Teen Corner Article By Emilia Hamburg

When cancer is thrown into the life of a teen it takes a toll, especially when it is their parent, sister or brother who is sick. Fear and anxiety develop quickly, and they begin to lose focus. Their grades drop, they begin to isolate themselves and their performance in sports is not the same. They begin to worry about expenses and how that will affect their family and their lives, leaving them feeling insecure about their future. Their path is no longer clear; instead, it is filled with twists and turns that they are unsure how to navigate. Most importantly, they worry for their parent, sister or brother, not knowing what the end result will be and if their family will win or lose their battle with cancer, what it might mean if Mom, Dad, sister or brother pass.

This past week I had the opportunity and pleasure to interview Alicia Kabir, the COO of Camp Kesem. Camp Kesem is a nationwide community that is driven by college students. The college students serve as the counselors for the camp whose campers are kids who have been impacted by the burdens of a parent's cancer. Due to the financial burden placed upon these families Camp Kesem is offered free to these kids, allowing them to have fun and take a break from the pressures of their reality for at least a week. Camp Kesem offers a place of no judgment, a place to be fully yourself where you immediately click with people that understand that part of your feelings that sometimes you are too afraid to show. But most importantly Camp Kesem is a safe place for these kids to talk about Cancer, where they are not judged when they express how they are feeling, to no longer receive unwanted sympathetic looks from others who just do not understand what they are going through. Camp Kesem's goal is to support these children through and beyond a parent's cancer. What makes Camp Kesem special is that they focus on this unique population of children. They give these kids an opportunity to find joy in their darkness and connect with other people who are experiencing similar things.

The Camp maintains its support beyond the week's experience and offers a friends and family day twice a year, sends birthday cards to each camper and most importantly has a program called "Kesem by your Side". Kesem by Your Side is something extra, where the college students come back to help celebrate with the camper if their parent goes into remission and is there to support them if the family is going through a rough patch. Another program they have during camp is called Empowerment. This program gives campers the opportunity to update them with what is happening at home, good or bad, and is optional. Other programs are offered specifically for teens, these leadership programs allow them to run different activities around camp. This program is especially loved by all the teens because it allows them to return to Camp Kesem. As one Kesem camper said, "it's truly magical when you find a place where you are genuinely loved by others and you can really accept yourself."

Camp Kesem is an extraordinary community and all their staff and campers feel it. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this year Camp Kesem went virtual and they did it quickly with less than six weeks to change their program around and convince families to still participate. Each of the national chapters had weeklong virtual camp experiences and offered activities such as talent shows. They sent each one of their campers a care package consisting of everything they would need to participate in camp this year as well as a t-shirt and a handwritten note from a counselor. Every camper and staff member discovered that Camp Kesem was not a place but a feeling and this feeling persisted even though their time together was on Zoom.

Camp Kesem is a place where kids dealing with a parent's cancer can go when they are hurting and leave feeling hopeful. They leave a little brighter than they came because Camp Kesem sparks joy within. It allows them to create lasting bonds and friendships with others dealing with similar feelings and problems. Kesem is the Hebrew word for magic which is fitting because Camp Kesem is a truly magical place for any child overwhelmed with the difficulty cancer brings to themselves and their families.

You can reach out to Camp Kesem directly through their webpage at CampKesem.org. They are a national organization and available for children and teens throughout the United States.