

## Camp reunites separated siblings

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The week that Vincent, Joshua and Asia Pocaigue spent at Camp to Belong Orange County meant more than just having fun.

Besides the obvious – sleeping in a bunkhouse, eating in a mess hall, and activities that included zip-lining and a trip to the beach – those five days gave them lots of time to be together.

Back home in Apple Valley, Vincent, 14, and Joshua, 11, live in a foster home with their legal guardian while Asia, 9, lives in a different foster home with her legal guardian.

They would see each other at school, but this year Vincent will be a freshman in high school and won't be at the same campus. During summer, they figure they get together about five times a month.

That's better than many siblings who have been separated while in the foster care system. But it's still not the same as brothers and sisters growing up in the same household.

Camp to Belong, held at the Irvine Ranch Outdoor Recreation Center in the hills above the city of Orange, gives children like Vincent, Joshua and Asia a taste of normalcy. They were among 102 children from 35 sibling sets attending the camp.

"Every day we can wake up and eat breakfast together and do activities together," Vincent said on their second day of camp last week. "It's an all-day, family thing."

Later that afternoon, the camp held its annual birthday party for all of the children. Siblings, who often don't get to celebrate birthdays together, picked out presents for each other from donated items and decorated their own little cakes.

"We wish there was no need for this type of a camp but the reality is there is a need," said TerryLynn Fisher, a spokeswoman for the Orange County Social Services Agency.

## **GETTING USED TO EACH OTHER**

Most of the more than 2,000 children in foster care in Orange County are placed with relatives or close family friends, Fisher said. She could not say what percent are siblings who have been separated.

The campers are as young as 8. Older youths ages 18 to 21 who still have siblings in dependent care can attend as counselors-in-training.

They come from single-family foster homes and from group homes. They might have the same mother and different fathers, or vice versa. One sibling might live with a biological parent and the others might be in foster care. Some have been separated by adoption.

Besides not being in the same home, they may live in different cities, different counties, even different states.

Vincent, Joshua and Asia have a little brother and sister, 7 and 6, who went to live in Georgia with their dad six months to a year ago, Joshua said.

"We don't see them," Asia said.

"Not at all anymore," Vincent added.

They hope their younger siblings can join them at Camp to Belong someday when they are old enough.

Being around a sibling that you don't see all the time has its complications.

Heaven Justiz, 19, first came to Camp to Belong Orange County when she was 14. She spent the week with her sister, Alexis Reynolds, who is two years younger. They have been back every year since.

They hadn't seen their younger brother, Miguel Justiz, 12, for seven years until they all got together last summer at Camp to Belong. They all have the same biological father.

They started seeing Miguel more often after camp last year, Heaven said. "We realized it's too hard to be away from each other for so long."

Heaven lived in a foster home in Mission Viejo until a couple of weeks ago when she moved into a transitional housing apartment near Fullerton College, where she will start school later this month. Alexis was adopted at the age of 9 and lives in Anaheim. Miguel lives in Riverside with his mother.

Heaven, who hurt her ankle while zip-lining, sat in the shade by the pool and kept an eye out for Alexis and Miguel. She was a counselor-in-training at the camp this year.

That first year at Camp to Belong with Alexis was not easy initially, Heaven said. They were getting into little fights with each other.

"Then somebody picked on her and I was like, 'Oh, no you don't.'"

Alexis was feeling some of that same protectiveness toward Miguel when she came out of the pool and plopped down in a chair near Heaven. She said that she was feeling "broody" because two other girls were chasing her brother around and flirting with him. It really bothered her that one of the girls was 15.

Cindy Roe, one of the camp directors, advised Alexis to be watchful but not get caught up in any drama.

"He's my *baby brother*," Alexis said before heading off to change out of her swimsuit.

Roe works with Kinship Center in Orange County, an agency that provides adoption services and works with children in foster care. She has seen this kind of dynamic before with siblings who haven't been able to grow up together.

"If they had more opportunity to spend time together," Roe said of Alexis and Miguel, "she would know him a bit better and feel more comfortable with it."

## **HOW IT STARTED**

This is the fifth year Camp to Belong has taken place in Orange County. The camp is made possible by donations to the nonprofit Eddie Nash Foundation based in Orange and the support of a host of volunteers.

Bryan "Eddie" Nash says he grew up in Orange County under similar circumstances as the children who attend Camp to Belong. In his 2007 self-published autobiography, "A Phoenix Rising: Defining the Moments," he describes how his youth and his relationship with his sister were scarred by abandonment, abuse and separation.

He found success in adulthood in the construction business and in real estate development but decided he wanted to devote more of his attention to helping youth in the foster care system.

Nash, 55, said it was during a book tour that he was asked to be a guest speaker at a Camp to Belong being held in Idaho.

"It was like a slideshow of my childhood," Nash said of what he learned about the children served by Camp to Belong, an international organization. "I was like, 'Holy smoke!' I have a foundation and I saw this program and I said Orange County needs it."

One of his biggest supporters has been the Villa Park Rotary Club, which has taken on Camp to Belong as an ongoing project, said Pam Dunn, the club's vice president who became a volunteer with the Eddie Nash Foundation.

It costs about \$1,500 to finance two campers and one counselor, Dunn said. Camp to Belong Orange County tries to maintain a 2-to-1 camper to counselor ratio.

Most of the children live in Orange County but some came from San Bernardino County.

Dunn says she sees how being together outside the complicated circumstances of their foster care placements can change the relationship between siblings.

"At the beginning of the week, they act one way, then by the end of the week they have their arms around each other. You see them kidding with each other, more like a normal sibling."

Just ask Vincent, Joshua and Asia.

"We fight more at home," Joshua said about the disagreements he and his brother have. "Here we don't fight as much. We're having a good time."

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