

Searching for the Words

Our camp bubble of happiness burst just ten days after the close of the summer season with the sudden death of Erica Vallario, CK-NJ camper from 1997-2001 and counselor in 2006. The news shocked our camp family and brought together many campers and staff - in person, online and by phone - to seek comfort and share our expressions of disbelief and deep grief. Many campers and staff were also able to be present at the wake or funeral.

Words seem insufficient to express our feelings at this time. Each of us has our own personal memories of Erica and our own private grief. But we need to say something because we shared precious time with Erica and now, with her passing, we are bound together by the need to remember and to try to understand what has happened.

Many meaningful words have been shared among the Campus Kids family. You may have read them in a variety of online forums, profiles and away messages. Some of them also were submitted to this issue of the "Sundial". I, humbly, add a few thoughts here.

We learned that the strength of friends and community are most appreciated when facing adversity. Few, if any, of us can bear the weight of such a loss without hugging someone who cares and talking to someone who wants to listen. During this past month I have seen countless instances of camp people realizing how much they mean to each other. And I have felt it for myself.

We were jolted into actually understanding how important each day is. We knew it all along, but few of us understood its relevance in our lives, particularly the youngest among us. Jack Kornfield said it about as bluntly as possible: "The trouble is that you think you have time." No moment is trivial, no day not worth living well.

Those who knew Erica have spent time - through prayer or quiet contemplation or conversation - to understand what she meant in our lives and to try to describe her unique qualities. One of those, in my view, was her eagerness to move ahead and get things done. Erica didn't wait around. She wanted to be physically active and socially engaged. This is partly why she made so many significant friendships in just one summer with both

her campers and her fellow staff. Erica struggled with questions about what to do with her life, but she did not hesitate to make every day energetic and significant. I thought of her as I read these words from Ron Atchison: "It is time . . . it is time . . . and this is my simple message for today. If there's something special you want to do, now is the time. . . . If you want to make a difference in the world, now is the time. Don't be fooled into thinking you should wait until you are older or wiser or more 'secure' because it doesn't work that way. The wisdom will come. The security will come. But first you must begin your adventure."

Erica's adventure was shorter than planned, but it was happy and it made a difference in a great many lives. We were lucky that one of the best parts of her adventure was with us. For that, we are very grateful and we will never forget her.

On behalf of the Campus Kids family, I again want to extend our condolences and love to Erica's parents, Cynthia and Richard. They, too, have been an important part of our camp community for many years and we wish we could do more to ease their pain.

Today, tomorrow and all the days following are different because of you, Erica. Rest in peace.

Tom

tom@campuskids.com

(The Vallario family has requested that memorial contributions be made to the Make-A-Wish foundation.)

