

For broken families, a week to connect The Boston Globe

Separated in foster care, siblings share brief bond in camp

By Susan Chaityn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent |
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Jamel Roy and his sister, Shamika, share the same shape eyes, a talent for competitive diving, and a love of broccoli dipped in ranch dressing.

What they don't share is a home. Shamika lives in Westhampton, Jamel in Weston.

The brother and sister don't have the luxury of playing practical jokes on each other, whiling away an afternoon playing Monopoly, or tussling over the TV remote. With 98 miles between them, their meetings have to be scheduled.

Shamika was 3 weeks old and Jamel just shy of 2 years old when they entered the foster care system. Transferred among homes in Puerto Rico, Florida, and Massachusetts, the children, now teenagers, have moved more often than most people do in a lifetime.

Last August, Jamel, who turns 15 next month, and Shamika helped inaugurate Camp To Belong on Cape Cod. Along with 57 other children in their situation, siblings split up by foster care arrangements or adoption, they enjoyed the rare opportunity to spend seven uninterrupted days together.

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The Yarmouth Port camp is one of eight nationwide; the first was founded in 1995 in Colorado.

Jamel smiled as he talked recently about going horseback riding and making a boomerang with his sister at last summer's camp. "Every morning my sister and I meet in groups with other siblings called 'families,'" he said. "We go to breakfast and are together the whole day."

Horseback riding is one of the most popular activities among the children, said camp director Tawni Whitney. "It's nice to hear the encouragement they give each other," Whitney said. "It's a powerful experience."

Jamel hopes to return to the camp this summer. "I'm not too sure if I can, but it would be cool," he said.

Finances are tight in his household, and at this point his adoptive mother, Mary Roy, cannot promise Jamel that he will be able to go back. The state covers the \$500 fee for children in foster care, but not for those who have been adopted.

Steve and Jamie Levine of Shrewsbury want to make sure no camper

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is turned away for lack of money, spearheading a drive to collect money long before thoughts of sunscreen and swimsuits replace those of hats and gloves. They have organized a benefit concert March 11 at the Hoagland/Pincus Amphitheater in Shrewsbury, which has already sold out its 250 seats.

Maia Sharp, who just toured with Bonnie Raitt and whose song "Home" helped the Dixie Chicks win Album of the Year at the 2003 Grammy awards, will lead the bill.

She will be joined by folk singer Kate Klim and Wellesley's John Cate Band, whose rock tunes have been featured on TV shows "Touched by an Angel" and "Dawson's Creek."

"We keep getting anonymous checks, one the other day for \$1,400," said Steve Levine. Between the show and donations, Levine said, he hopes to collect \$8,000.

Jamie Levine learned about Camp To Belong from a report on National Public Radio last summer.

For nearly two years, the Levines have been taking in children on short notice while the state finds them a permanent home.

They hope the concert will not only raise money, but also awareness of the need for more temporary foster homes like theirs.

"We've taken care of 17 children in the past year," said Steve Levine. "If I recruit you and next year you take care of 17 children, we're now caring for 34 children."

About 10,000 children are in foster or residential care in Massachusetts, according to the state Department of Social Services.

While DSS tries to keep siblings together, it's not always feasible, according to Melissa Del Conte, an adoption supervisor in the state agency's Framingham office.

"Sometimes a sibling is the only contact they have to their birth family, particularly if they're in an adoptive home," Del Conte said.

Jamie Levine worked as a pediatric oncology nurse for 15 years before opting to stay home to raise the couple's three sons, who are now 8, 11, and 16. The youngest recently encouraged his religious education class at Temple B'nai Shalom in Westborough to donate the \$250 of tzedaka, or charity money, they raised toward clothing and supplies for children entering DSS care.

"My parents were always doing this sort of thing," said Steve Levine, who is a real estate agent. "I remember when I was a little kid, and we had virtually nothing, my mother would be doing fund-raisers for the local hospitals in New Jersey."

Judy Cockerton brought Camp to Belong to Massachusetts after seeing Oprah Winfrey honor its founder, Lynn Price, with her annual Use Your Life award six years ago.

Cockerton and her husband, Arthur Pollock, became foster parents in 1998 after their two children were grown. They later adopted Brianna, who is now 7 years old.

Children have been the focus of the Cockertons' personal and professional lives. She taught at the Learning Center in Framingham in the late '70s and early '80s before opening No Kidding toy stores,

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which she ran in Brookline and Mattapoisett for 20 years.

Wanting to become more active in child advocacy, the Sharon resident founded the Treehouse Foundation in 2001 to promote adoption and various programs for families with adopted or foster children. Under its auspices, Cockerton launched the Massachusetts branch of Camp To Belong. Eventually the camp will be moved to Easthampton, where the foundation is establishing a community of families with adopted children.

Brianna's 6-year-old sister, Angel McClure, has been adopted by a Framingham family. They will be able to attend the camp when Angel reaches the minimum age of 8, but for now their parents make sure they see each other regularly.

Angel's father, Doug, is a technology professional in the healthcare field, and her mother, Kimberly, was a preschool teacher for the LEAP School in Sudbury for seven years before staying home with Angel and their biological daughter, who is 9.

"Angel and I both have curly hair, so often people will say, 'Oh, you got your curly hair from your mom.' I'll say, 'Yep, she does,' and leave it at that," said Kimberly McClure.

"When you're in a family where you don't necessarily look like the people that you're living with and that you're loving, it's nice to be with someone whose hands are shaped like your hands," she said.

And the similarity among siblings is more than skin deep.

"We will look at these two sisters when they're playing and they move like sisters," McClure said.

While Angel and Brianna have had the good fortune of getting to know one another, many of the children at Camp To Belong have a lot of catching up to do.

"Campers are given cameras at the start of the week to make a memory book to take home," said Whitney, the camp director. "They also make a pillow for each other and write a special message to their brother or sister."

The messages, which are inscribed with a fabric marker, may be as simple as "I love you." Others convey much more.

Whitney remembers one particular message, which quoted a saying by author Taylor Hansen: "To the world you may be one person but to one person you may be the world."

"They treasure the messages," she said. "When I visit with the children after camp they always have the pillow set aside in a very special place in their home."

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To help:

For more information on Camp To Belong, visit [www.camp belong.org/campyear massachusetts.htm](http://www.camp belong.org/campyear_massachusetts.htm).

To make a donation, contact director Tawni Whitney at 774-212-0269 or e-mail tawni@camp belong.org. ■