



# Meet Jess



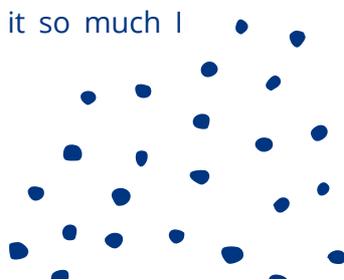
**We asked Jess, one of our amazing volunteers, to tell us about her experience volunteering at our camps in summer 2022.**

My name is Jess and I'm a secondary school Biology teacher with a background in Zoology and Conservation biology. I'm also a guide leader and love music!

When I finished my A Levels, I took an 'accidental' gap year and ended up at a girl scout camp in the USA.

I loved the experience so much that I went back every year for five years. Seeing the way a short-term stay at camp can have a long-term impact on a child was incredible. So when I heard about Over The Wall camps, I jumped at the chance to volunteer in the UK!

I'd only planned to volunteer at one Over The Wall camp this year, but I enjoyed it so much I ended up volunteering at two more!



## Why did you want to volunteer at Over The Wall?

I wanted to get back into the camp spirit and teach things that I learned from my camp experience in the USA—including lots of songs!! The world of camp is like a little bubble—it's hard to explain to those who haven't been. I knew before arriving that I'd have a fun but equally rewarding time.

Through my time at girl scout camps in the USA, I saw the positive and long-term impact a week at camp could have on children. These were children without health challenges, so to run a camp for children with health challenges like Over The Wall does, is even more important in giving kids that space to grow and challenge themselves.

Camp is an entirely stripped-back experience that gives kids the space to be kids. Especially with screen time and social media, it's so important for kids to be able to grow in confidence away from all that and focus on having fun and building relationships.

## Were you nervous about going to camp?

Only a little! I wasn't nervous about the camp aspect; I was excited to get stuck back into camp life. I was a bit nervous as I'd never worked with children with serious illnesses and health challenges before, so I wasn't sure how this would be managed in a camp setting. But I really had nothing to worry about!

As volunteers, we're not usually told about the illnesses and conditions the children have. Beach Patrol are incredible, and it was their job to handle that side of things. My job was to hang out with the campers and make sure they were having fun! Having a health challenge made no difference to the campers' experiences, as camp is designed with them in mind. It made no difference to my experience as a volunteer either!

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## What's your favourite memory of camp?

It's hard to choose, especially as I volunteered at three camps this summer, but there were special memories that stuck out from each camp:

At South Health Challenge camp I was with the blue team, the eldest group of campers. They were the most phenomenal group of young people I've ever met. They were all so supportive of one another! For some of them it was their last opportunity to enjoy camp and they were so aware of it. On the last day we did a writing activity where campers had to write one word to describe the camp graduates, those that wouldn't be coming back next year.

There was no way these campers were only going to write one word; they all had such lovely things to say about each other! It instead turned into notes of recognition rather than one word, with each message being incredibly thoughtful and touching. It was really moving to see the impact on these campers, and how aware they were of the special moments they shared.

At the Midlands Health Challenge camp, it was seeing the campers experience all the challenge core activities. We had some campers that immediately refused: We're not doing that! But after 10 minutes they were flying down the zip wire. That was a very special moment to watch these kids enjoy these activities, some of them for the very first time, because their health challenge would have prevented them from doing it at school.

At DRWF family camp, the campers were quite shy at the dinner table on the first night. But by the end of camp they were shouting across to each other about their dinner and what they were eating! Knowing that they weren't the only ones with diabetes gave them a newfound confidence and changed the way they viewed their life. The transformation was incredible to see.

The only struggle is that at the end of the week, the campers leave, and we never hear from them again until their next camp. That's the tough part, you just want to know how they're getting on after camp. The last cabin chat is always really emotional, but we know it's because we've all had an amazing time and are sad that it's over.

## Has this changed the way you approach your day job?

Yes, absolutely! It's strengthened my ability to empathise with my students and adapt to their different needs. I'm more confident in the classroom and understand the individual needs of certain students and how they might process things differently to others. I'd like to think the more open approach I'm taking to the classroom will benefit the students long-term too. Whilst a very different environment to camp, it's still possible to have an impact even when it's just me, standing in front of a class of 30!



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## What would you say to anybody thinking of volunteering at Over The Wall?

Just do it! It's only 4-5 days but the change in the children and young people you see is phenomenal. It's a really special thing you can do to transform their lives within the space of a week. I think coming from a non-medical background, it might feel like an overwhelming thing to be in charge of children with health challenges away from their parents. But actually, you have no idea what conditions they have. What you get to see is watch them flourish and become more comfortable with themselves, regardless of their health challenge.

You also get to meet amazing people. Some were teachers like me, others were former campers that have gone on to volunteer. All are kind and compassionate people with plenty of empathy to give, so there's no way you wouldn't fit in with the team.

One of the great things about an Over The Wall camp is that there are about 8-9 adult volunteers per group. This increases the chance of a camper finding an adult they have a real connection with, alongside the connections they make with the other campers. So if you're looking for a volunteering opportunity where you can make a real difference to a young person's life, then camp is the place for you. Your belief in them makes a world of difference.

The importance of these children and young people having the space to open up, explore things they wouldn't normally do and meet campers their own age going through the same thing...that's really special. Knowing I had a part to play in their experience is something I'll never forget. I can't wait to come back next year.



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