



# Meet Becca

**Volunteer at camp, like Becca, and discover a world of possibilities. Becca gained skills for life at camp whilst changing the lives of children and young people with health challenges and their families.**

Now, she's studying to become a teacher. This Student Volunteering week, we asked Becca to tell us about her experience as a volunteer at camp.

## **Growing up and finding my feet at camp**

Me and my twin sister, Courtney, started going to Siblings camp when we were 12. Our little sister, Jess, had been diagnosed with leukaemia. We lived in Cornwall, but Mum and Dad had to drive Jess to Bristol and London for treatment. They did this whilst Courtney and I were doing our GCSEs, so we spent a lot of time apart from our parents and Jess. Our teenage years were very difficult because of this—hospitals and travelling for appointments was all we knew.

Over The Wall camps were a break from all of that. Courtney and I went to Siblings camp for four years running. We kept going back because it made such a difference to us, it was the best place to be. We couldn't go away as a family, so it was nice that me and Courtney had the chance to go to camp as a break for us. Jess got to go to Health Challenge camp too, the year before she passed away. She was eight when she went and absolutely loved it. We were 17 when Jess died.

Me and Courtney weren't very confident, so we were glad that we had each other and were in the same team. We were totally different when we left our last camp compared to the first time we went. To be somewhere where everyone understood what it was like and to be known as Becca, or Becca and Courtney, rather than Jess's sisters—that felt amazing.



## From confident camper to talented teacher

I've wanted to be a teacher since I was younger. It was my experience at Over The Wall and working at an SEN school that encouraged me to start. Hopefully by the end of this year I'll be a qualified primary school teacher! I have a degree in Childhood Education and Social Science, but I wasn't sure teaching was the right path at first. It was lack of confidence more than anything that stopped me before! I've learned a lot about myself through volunteering with Over The Wall and becoming a camp team leader.

Working with children and making a difference is why I want to be a teacher—it's similar to Over The Wall. Hopefully one day I'll have a class of my own and watch their progress, knowing I've got them to where they are. I especially like working with 10-year-olds—they're still little but they have that little bit of independence.

**“LOOKING BACK AT IT NOW, I REALISE I DIDN'T GET TO BE A TEENAGER BECAUSE OF EVERYTHING GOING ON AT HOME.**

### **“Camp was a place we could feel free!”**

One of my favourite memories when I was a camper was from a drama session at camp. One of the volunteers, Alice, who has since sadly passed away, was leading the session. Drama was my worst nightmare! I was dreading it. But me, my sister and two other girls from our team ended up doing an interpretative dance and running around dressed as chickens! I think we described it at the time as being just free. No one was judging, no one cared. I think that's where my confidence began to grow realising it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. It was a breakthrough moment.

The last couple of years we went to camp, we did other performances in the talent shows, like a Fresh Prince of Bel air-inspired routine. I don't know how I did that! Dressing up and standing in front of a crowd was not in my comfort zone at all. The way everyone was cheering and supporting us, and the fun we were having, it just made me feel like a kid again. Looking back at it now, I realise I didn't get to be a teenager because of everything going on at home. Camp was fun and silly and a place to be free. The volunteers made you feel like you could be like that, and it was celebrated, which made you want to do it more! I think that's why I kept going back.



## Returning to camp as a volunteer

I started volunteering when I was 18. All I can remember was how fun it was! The volunteers put so much effort in to make sure everyone is okay and having a good time. It was no wonder I felt so good as a camper! I wanted to help others and make sure camp was about the campers, so they could feel the same way I did when I was at camp.

I had no issue switching from camper to volunteer. There's a lot of training and a lot goes into camp, but I didn't feel any pressure as a volunteer. It was all manageable as you work as a team, and the team leaders support you any way they can.



## Making a difference

There is a big difference between the campers from the beginning to end of camp. The campers are usually very shy when they arrive! For example, there were a few quiet campers who were quite similar, so we made sure there were opportunities to sit them together during cabin chat, activities and meals. This encouraged them to get to know each other and by the end they were the most confident because they'd come together and found common interests.

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It's important to get to know the campers at the start. When I went into the campers' room with another volunteer, we ended up being there for an hour. We got speaking to a couple of the campers and asked them about their hobbies. We tried to get a sense of their humour to get them laughing and joking. By the end of the hour the rest of our group of campers had found us and were joining in. They then felt ready to come out and meet everyone else. I remember those volunteers that would help unpack your bags and get to know you. That builds a rapport, so that the campers will come to you throughout the whole week and feel more confident and able to speak to you. It's very rare that you'll have anyone still stuck in their shell by the end of the week!



## Becoming a team

The group I team-led was made up of a lot of 18-year-old volunteers. It can be hard when you don't know what to do, so telling them that it was okay to just go and chat with the campers helped them feel a bit more confident.

I didn't know how much experience they had with children, so it's important to be aware of different abilities. I helped them feel there was no pressure and to do what felt right. You start to get to know the volunteers by Day Three, so by Day Four and Five you just wish you had a few more days to spend with everyone all together. Everyone's confidence skyrockets throughout the week. We all were a massive team!



In the last cabin chat, I asked all the campers to write down a message to the volunteers. On the last night, Chloe and I got the volunteers together and we read out the messages. Everyone was crying. The volunteers needed to see how much of an impact they made, especially as a lot of them had never been to camp before. They needed to know how important they are. Even if they thought they hadn't made a difference, the campers were saying all these little things that the volunteers didn't realise had had an impact. They got to take the messages home too, so it wasn't just the campers with something to take with them.

After my first time as team leader, I wanted to volunteer at camp all over again. I couldn't express how proud I was of my team and I couldn't have done it without them.

## Cabin Chat

My final cabin chat with my team is one of my favourite memories from camp last summer. They're always the nicest and almost the best part of camp. It's really reflective and a chance to look at the whole week. We were all sitting in a circle and I asked the campers to just take a moment to read the messages in front of them (from the hand activity).

**“YOU DON'T NEED TO BE WORRIED ABOUT HOW YOU LOOK OR HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF. JUST BE YOUR SILLIEST SELF AND THE KIDS WILL LOVE IT.”**

I had another activity planned, but the room was filled with loud laughter and chatter. So I changed my plan and let them carry on and leave them to laugh and chat. I decided to sit back and chat with the campers without any pressure or time constraints and just enjoy talking to them. It felt like a real team at the end of that night. The campers were grateful that they could sit in a relaxed environment and chat to the volunteers.

## Camp helped me pursue my dream career

I don't think I would've gotten into teaching without Over The Wall. When I graduated, I wasn't confident enough to go into teaching. My time at Over The Wall made me realise I didn't need to be the loudest person in the room to succeed.

I started teaching classes recently and remember thinking: just imagine you're at camp and imagine the teaching assistants are other volunteers. It's very similar, because the children in your class aren't judging you either, just like at camp. Volunteering at Over The Wall has made me the teacher I am today. It's made a difference to my teaching style. I'm calm, approachable and organised.

All my skills from camp help me as a teacher, but drama is still not my forte! I'm not really expressive but I try to get on the students' level and make lessons fun. I've brought a lot of the cabin chat activities into the classroom. On my next placement I'll bring in the hand activity and the web of friendship, where you all say nice things about each other. I think as my confidence grows in the classroom my confidence will grow as team leader at camp.

## A message to campers of siblings with a health challenge

The thought of going to camp and leaving your sibling with the health challenge behind is probably a bit of a worry for a lot of siblings. You're going to get a lot out of coming to camp and meeting others in similar situations. I'm still friends with people who were siblings when I was a camper and they're some of my closest friends.

It's hard to leave your ill sibling, but there are lots of benefits to coming to camp. You'll probably get a different insight to life and help you cope better. It's really hard to describe but I don't think you realise how much you need camp before you come.

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