



Meet Len



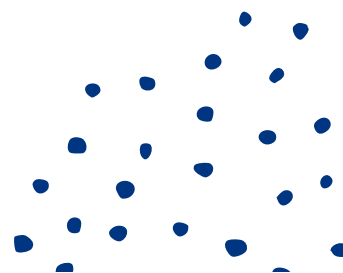
Len is confident, and chatty and likes hanging out with his friends and going shopping—just like any other teenager!

Len came to our South Health Challenge residential camp when he was 15, in the summer of 2022. Len has epilepsy and Sturge-Weber syndrome, a rare vascular disorder. Before camp, Len felt held back by his health challenge. We asked Len to tell us about his experience at residential camp and his plans for the future.

How did you feel about going to residential camp?

I was nervous when I arrived. I was a bit worried about leaving my family but thought it would be good to try and make some new friends and gain some confidence.

I wanted to see what it's like for other people with different illnesses and whether there were people like me who could relate to me. But I really enjoyed it, it was really good!



What was your favourite memory from camp?

I have two! The first was when I was on the climbing wall. I was really nervous to do it. All the volunteers and children were cheering me on because I was really struggling. At the time I only had use of one of my arms. I fell and I kept falling and gave up. But at the end, the instructors said they had time for two or three more people to give it another try. I was too scared at first, but everyone managed to convince me to give it another try. When I did it, I made it $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up, everyone was cheering me on and clapping for me. So it just shows, even though I didn't do the best out of my group I did the best out of my ability. They were all so proud of me, which made me proud of myself. I didn't think I'd be able to do the climbing at all, but I didn't give up—I persevered and it made me more resilient.

My second favourite memory was when I spoke to another camper and told them I was really struggling, feeling really anxious and I didn't know what to do. They asked if they could tell someone on the team that I was struggling. I said they could. Me and the volunteer, Courtney, had a really nice long chat and it changed my perspective looking on things and helped my anxiety. What he said changed my life and his words still help me today. It's incredible that a stranger—someone I'd only known for three days—could help me so much. Now when I get anxious or upset, I think: "What would Courtney say or what would he do to try and help me?"

What was it like to meet other people like you at camp?

Everyone at camp was so amazing and friendly, volunteers and campers included. Meeting other people like me made me realise I'm not the only one struggling. There's people you can talk to at camp that you can relate to.

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**YOU'RE MORE THAN
JUST YOUR ILLNESS
AND NOT JUST THE
SICK KID**

It's nice to talk about what we go through and the experiences we've had even if we don't have the same illness or disability, to unload a bit. Mum said when I came back I was like a different child! I couldn't stop talking about the people I'd met, what I got up to and how I was feeling now that I completed camp.

I'm still in contact with one camper I met at camp and hopefully meeting up with her soon. She's going to show me around where she lives and I'm really excited to see her again.



What did you learn about yourself at camp?

Over The Wall teaches you that it's all about "I can, not I can't". You push limits and break down barriers that you face in life. You're more than just your illness and not just the sick kid. Before camp, I thought no one's going to want to go out with me because I need quite a bit of help with things. I was too scared to ask my friends to go out with me. But actually, now that I've come back, I've arranged to go out with two of my friends. I wouldn't have done that before! It's nice to feel confident enough to go out and ask my friends if they want to come with me and feel like I'm not a burden anymore. And even though I do have an illness, it's not going to stop me or keep me inside. I am going to go out and do what I want to do. I love to go shopping, out for coffee and go walking with my friends!



I'm much more confident now and have higher self-belief. It's taught me to take each day as it comes and even though you might be a bit different, you should use that as your superpower. You're unique, you're strong, you're powerful. Your disability or illness doesn't define you, you're still a good person. The other campers didn't let their health challenges stop them, so why should it stop anyone? I used to think I couldn't do a lot of things but it's made me realise that actually I can.



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How do you feel about the future?

Mum says I talk a lot more positively about the future. Since going to residential camp I feel more confident about growing up and moving away, maybe even to a different town one day, or even a different country like France! Before I wasn't sure if I'd ever move out. If I did, I wanted to stay close to Mum but now I have the confidence to travel further away.

I'd love to become a volunteer at Over The Wall when I'm older. I want to volunteer because Over The Wall has helped me so much. I feel like I can give back, so I should. Whether I help one child with their confidence and feel better about themselves or I help 10 children, it's giving back. Volunteering won't just benefit the children, but it'll help me too knowing I'm making a difference. I think you can't really understand what it's like having a disability or illness unless you've been through it already. So as a volunteer, I'd be able to empathise with the children that little bit more because I share their same experiences.



What would you say to others thinking of coming to camp?

Don't be nervous and enjoy it as much as you can! Just feel free to spread your wings. Make friends and make memories because you might only go to camp once. Even if you go more than once, it's important to make those good memories.

The memories I've made will last in my mind forever. The happiness and confidence it's brought to me will last forever. Get involved in everything, even if you're scared—give it a go and try your hardest!

Notes from Mum, Vicky

Over The Wall residential camp was the first time that Len had been somewhere and felt included and welcome. It's a place where it's all about "I can, not I can't". It was encouraging for him to meet others like him.

Children with illnesses and long-term conditions spend half their lives in hospital, so it did him the world of good to go to camp and realise he's not the only one that faces these struggles.

He has been poorly and he has struggled, and it's only when he went away did I realise how hard it's been for him. It was nice to see him do stuff at camp on his own and gain that independence. Camp gave him that safe space to do what other kids can do.

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