

Profile: Declan Mc Namee

Tell us in a few hundred words which Camp you were at and what you got up to at camp?

I went to my first camp in Connecticut 10 years ago as a one off trip, and now 10 years later I'm still returning to camp. This summer I spent the summer at camp Bloomfield, a camp in Malibu California for the blind and visually impaired. My job was activities leader. I was making sure all the activities were running smoothly and everyone was being safe. We had horse riding, ropes course, arts and crafts, archery and more. It was all catered by the staff for the blind and visually impaired to get the most out of it. I helped run the campfire and evening activities, talked to the kids with behaviour issues and staff when things were bothering them. We had events at camp like international day where the staff talked about their home countries and cooked some of their native foods, Christmas in July where we had artificial snow brought to camp at the campfire, sang Christmas songs and the campers got presents, and a Halloween dance where everyone got dressed up in their best Halloween outfit. We also had a few field trips with the kids and adults.

Top 3 memories of Summer Camp?

1. Seeing numerous blind kids climb to the top of the rock wall and the encouragement they got from the rest of the group
2. Seeing a camper who refused to dance at the dance suddenly burst into joy when her favourite song came on and hit the dance floor.
3. Going to a 50's diner style restaurant with staff and turning the whole restaurant into a huge dance party to the delight of the manager.

Was there a camper that stands out in your mind? If so why?

There are numerous campers that always stand out for several different reasons, but the camper that stands the most is one kid called Chris. He is completely blind, but gets around camp as easily as someone sighted, is completely independent, taught me great dance moves and I once saw him guide another visually impaired friend around the dining hall. It was literally the blind leading the blind.



What are some of the experiences that you had which made an impact on you?

My first dance at camp the counsellors had to go for a meeting and when the music was played all the sighted kids got up and danced in the makeshift dance floor. The blind kids remained seated because they can't see where the dance floor was. That's when I realised what the director had touched on in staff week about the blind kids have less friends. Not because people don't want to approach blind people, but because it's so easy for them to be left behind. Seeing some of the kids who are completely blind, and in some cases have more serious conditions, and seeing how they have to live their life really puts into perspective how trivial your problems really are. It showed me that with a positive attitude you can achieve anything despite any handicaps you may have. For staff week we had to eat our meals blindfolded, and get around camp blindfolded which really helps you appreciate the challenges these people face. The impact for me is that I feel I am more aware of the people around me, and it's made me less afraid to approach someone and simply ask questions about their condition. It's not offensive.



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Did you travel after camp? Tell us about your adventures – where did you go?

I travelled around the states after camp with some friends on a road trip and continued myself with a train pass afterwards. I went from the west coast to the east coast and back again. Flights help you get somewhere fast which helps if you have certain things you really want to see and a short time to see them, but in a car or on a train helps you see so much more of the country and can sometimes make or break a friendship when you have to spend so much time in a car with someone, but camp prepares you well for that.

What was camp food and your accommodation like?

I have had lots of camp food at different camps; the quality is never going to be great. It's all processed food, bought in bulk to feed a lot of people. The best you can hope for is a camp that serves its food with a bit of variety. It certainly makes you appreciate good food on your breaks.

Our cabins were in pretty good condition! Apparently they were just revamped from the previous year, so we got a bit lucky. It was warm and comfy; creaky beds and all!

What is something unexpected/different/strange about USA compared to home?

People are quite happy to let you drive their car, simply take it if you need to get off camp etc. Strange.

What did you value about going to Summer Camp with IEP?

IEP were always on the ball! Any small problem or piece of advice or support I needed IEP were always there. Any email I sent was responded to quickly with help and advice until the issue was sorted.

Would you do it again?

I would certainly do it again in a heartbeat, in fact I wouldn't leave if I could stretch the summer out to a lifetime.

Did you gain anything from Camp that will benefit you in what you do next?

I have found something I'm passionate about.... camp. I hope to stay in the camping industry and would love to continue working or volunteering with the blind.

Do you have any advice for someone who wants a Summer Camp adventure?

If you're looking for a summer camp adventure, you simply have to go for it. It's something people tell me all the time they always wanted to do but now it's too late. It's a life changing experience for kids and staff alike. You will never regret going. Just show up with a positive attitude and be ready to make the most out of the summer. Be ready for long hours with kids, who will drive you crazy and brighten your day in equal measures; who will leave you so tired you have to find a second wind when they leave to make the most of your time off. Who may even make you wish they would just leave, but will make you sad when they finally do leave.



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