

Fresh Air Fund: Girls' camp nurtures kind, confident and successful kids

Twin sisters Nancy and Rebecca struggled to complete high school and fit in when family trauma forced them and their mother into Toronto's shelter system.

But [StepStones Summer Camp](#) for girls, aged 6 to 15, who have experienced trauma, abuse and unstable caregiving was a sanctuary, says Nancy, now 23.



Twin sisters Rebecca, left, and Nancy, 23, credit StepStones Summer Camp, on the shores of Georgian Bay, with helping them gain confidence and deal with struggles in their daily lives. (Bernard Weil / Toronto Star)

“Every year I looked forward to going,” she says of the camp on the shores of Georgian Bay. “It helped me escape hardships in the city and learn new skills. And it made me more confident.”

“It’s a place where you can be yourself and experience something new that you have never done before,” adds Rebecca. “At camp, we met other kids like us we could relate to and it helped us be more outgoing at school.”

In addition to giving the shy sisters the coping skills and confidence to weather chronic homelessness during their difficult teen years, the camp connected them to tutors and counselling for school. In college, StepStones helped with housing, scholarships, tutoring and lifelong mentors for their journey into adulthood.

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“StepStones has helped me a lot and continues to help me today,” says Nancy, who graduated from Seneca College in 2017 with a university degree in international business. She has been working in a currency exchange kiosk since February and in her spare time is studying project management. Nancy eventually wants to take the Canadian Securities Course to prepare her for a possible career in banking.

Rebecca has completed a two-year interior design diploma from Humber College and is halfway through a four-year bachelor of craft and design (textiles) degree at Sheridan College’s Oakville campus, sparked by her passion for crafts at StepStones camp.

“My mentor helped me make the change,” says Rebecca, who hopes to one day start a small business in fabric print design.

StepStones Summer Camp is receiving financial assistance from the Star’s [Fresh Air Fund](#) for the first time this year, one of 102 camps supported by the charity.

“Fresh Air funding is huge,” said StepStones’ executive director Heather O’Keefe. “It is a name people recognize and trust, so it has been a big vote of confidence in what we do,” she says.

“We take kids based on funding. So the more funding we get, the more kids we can help,” she adds.

The camp is serving about 70 girls this summer over two seven-day sessions. It costs \$600 to send one girl to camp, and \$800 for teens aged 13 to 15 to attend the leadership camp.

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O’Keefe, who has worked in the child protection system for more than 14 years and loved summer camp as a child, co-founded StepStones in 2004 to serve girls in foster care, the shelter system and other precarious living environments.

For the first few years, she ran the camp during her summer vacations. But by 2012, when she added year-round co-ed mentoring and support for teens aged 16 and up, it became a full-time mission. [StepStones’ Youth in Transition Mentoring Program](#) serves about 300 teens and young adults a year.

“I worked with so many kids who did well in foster care but then fell apart when they left care,” O’Keefe says. “I wanted to do something about that.”

Just 44 per cent of youth who have been involved with the child protection system complete high school and even fewer attend college or university, O’Keefe notes. About 57 per cent are unemployed or rely on social assistance as young adults. And they make up about 58 per cent of the youth homeless population.

A staggering 76 per cent become victims of crime within 12 months of leaving the system. The camp and teen mentorship program are attempts to beat the depressing odds, O’Keefe says.

Camp activities, including book club, canoeing, swimming lessons, robotics and environmental science, are led by specially trained counsellors who become strong female role models, she says.

“Every youth learns a skill they can use in their daily lives, including coping strategies to deal with anxiety.”

Creating kind, confident and successful young women is the goal.

“It is a philosophy that recognizes that every child has these traits and it is our job to bring that out,” O’Keefe says.

Like most of the girls who attend StepStones camp, Nancy and Rebecca have blossomed and are among many who return after turning 16 to work in the camp kitchen.

Looking back, both sisters say they enjoyed arts and crafts the most. But when asked about her enduring memory of camp, Nancy doesn’t hesitate.

“Kind, confident and successful,” she says. “It was like our mantra. I’ll never forget that.”

The Star’s Fresh Air Fund aims to raise \$650,000 to send 25,000 kids to camp this summer.

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