

Alumna Page Adler co-founded The Painted Turtle, a camp that provides memorable experiences for children with life-threatening illnesses.



Serious Fun

By Olivia Herstein

Songs, shouts and laughter drift from the swimming pool, the grassy field and the high ropes course. Page Adler grins with pride as she leads visitors on a tour of her dream come true: The Painted Turtle camp.

This oasis, nestled high in the hills above Lake Hughes, north of Castaic, is no ordinary summer camp. The Painted Turtle serves children ages 7 to 16 from throughout the state who have life-threatening and chronic diseases. Their challenges range from hemophilia and spina bifida to kidney and liver transplants.

"We wanted to level the playing field and say to kids, 'You can be like any other kid,'" said Adler '96 (M.A., Educational Psychology & Counseling), who co-founded the camp with her husband, award-winning music producer Lou Adler, and other philanthropists, including actors Paul Newman and Jami Gertz and NBA coach Larry Brown. The overnight camp opened in 2004.

The camp runs eight one-week sessions during the summer, inviting kids up for a week at a time, as well as family camp on weekends during the school year.

"Yes, you're in a wheelchair, but you still get to go to camp!" said Adler, chairman of the camp's board of directors. "You can still ride a horse and go on the ropes course. Everything is adapted — everyone can participate. They can go 30 feet up in the air, even if their legs don't work. It's extraordinary."

The Painted Turtle is a member of the SeriousFun network of camps founded by Newman, although each camp is responsible for its own fundraising. All

campers and families attend The Painted Turtle free of charge.

Adler drew inspiration from her experience as a young adult volunteering at Newman's first camp for children with serious medical conditions, the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Ashford, Connecticut.

"Years later, after I went back and got my master's in educational psychology [at CSUN], I thought I'd love to start a camp like that for kids in California," she said.

The Painted Turtle is a magical environment for kids, many of whom spend a large chunk of their year in and out of hospitals. The 17-acre developed site on 173 acres in the Angeles National Forest boasts horses, riding trails, a whale-shaped swimming pool, a shady fishing dock with a stocked pond, arts and crafts and woodworking studios, a state-of-the-art gym, and air-conditioned cabins, among many other features. And it's all accessible.

"We never have to say, 'The wheelchair entrance is around to the right,'" Adler said. "That's just not in our vocabulary."

Kids Draw Counselors Back

One of the camp's most inspirational aspects is its staff, made up of paid, full-time counselors and young adults who volunteer their time. Some travel from as far away as Australia and Ireland.

One such volunteer is Josh Burger, a former camper-turned-counselor. He has an extremely rare condition called

osteogenesis type 3, which left him with misshapen and missing bones and dislocated joints. Today, Burger uses a wheelchair, oxygen and hearing aids. At age 16, he came to The Painted Turtle as a camper and found it so life-changing that he decided to return as a counselor.

"Hanging out with these kids keeps me coming back — putting a smile on their faces," said Burger, now 23. "My favorite thing is seeing the kids trying new things, overcoming their fears and developing confidence."

"This camp provides an outlet for these kids," added Burger. "A lot are usually in hospitals — they don't have a lot of friends. This camp is like a family."

A key building that makes their camp experience possible is the Well Shell, a dynamic medical facility that's much more than a traditional camp infirmary. Decked out with tiki huts, murals, homemade quilts, stuffed animals and a jungle theme, the Well Shell features a pharmacy and lounge chairs set up for kidney dialysis. This particular week, tables were set up for infusions for campers with hemophilia.

"What we learned very early on is that the camp in Connecticut served children with cancer, but there were many more different illnesses where kids were being hospitalized, and there were no programs for them," Adler said. "One of the first things we did was an assessment to find out what illnesses kids had where they didn't have this opportunity."

One of our first goals was to meet unmet needs."

The camp partners with the state's children's hospitals and volunteer organizations, which refer campers to The Painted Turtle through their pediatricians and other doctors. "A lot of these kids feel like this is their home," Adler said.

Drawing on Her CSUN Experience

Thinking back on graduate school, Adler said the educational psychology program at CSUN helped her develop tools she needed to establish the camp.

"CSUN had exactly what I was looking for — I was looking to work with children in hospitals who were impacted by illness," said Adler, a former actress and mother of seven sons. "I got to learn so much from my classmates. That was the biggest gift. Later, from what I learned at CSUN, I was able to focus in on the ways I thought would be beneficial for serving kids in camp."

Enthusiastic families and volunteers praise the community's support for the life-changing experiences the camp continues to provide thousands of children.

"Every time we come, we see the magic," longtime volunteer Mark "Pun" Maxwell-Smith told a group of campers after one of his recent magic trick demonstrations. "This is why we counselors keep coming back. And you're going to take camp with you."

This page: Page Adler, center, with counselors and campers, cheers on a camper who won the "Big Stick Award" for learning to self-infuse to treat his hemophilia.

Opposite page: The Painted Turtle campus. A camper takes on the ropes course.



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