

REACH Ministries

Safe community for those affected by HIV

Fall Newsletter 2017

New Families Seek and Find Acceptance

REACH joyfully welcomed three new families to Labor Day Camp this year. It was beautiful to watch our “veteran” campers warmly embrace these families, providing a lifeline of safe community and acceptance. Each of their stories is special, with unique struggles.

Imagine being 12 years old.

Being bullied forced you to switch schools midyear. Discord in friendships caused your family to switch churches as well. That was hard, but your family was handling it. Then one day it dawns on you. The rejection and family disruption is because you have HIV. You cry for an hour straight. “This is my fault. No one understands what I’m going through. I can’t handle this.”

At Camp you bond with a group of peers, and your mom sees you “let loose and have fun.” Mom knows **your family has somewhere to turn** when you face difficult circumstances.

Imagine finding out that your **teenage granddaughter and her infant have been diagnosed HIV-positive**. You learn everything you can about this disease. The more you learn, the less afraid of it you are. Without hesitation you invite them to move into your home - their healthiest option - and begin searching for safe community; people who will understand your granddaughter’s struggles.

At Camp you see her **surrounded by new loving friends** and you can’t wipe the smile off your face. You can’t stop thanking REACH for showing her that she and her baby can have a happy future.

Imagine adopting an HIV-positive preschooler from Africa.

You couldn’t have known how many people would question you about his constant doctor appointments, which threatened your ability to keep this private. And you were surprised that after a peaceful first year, you bore the brunt of challenging behaviors, stemming from his pre-adoption loss and pain. You become desperate to connect with families in the same boat.

At Camp you feel a rush of hope. You see children’s - even teenagers’ - **faces full of joy!** Maybe your child can have a hopeful future too.

“Our vision is that HIV-positive children, families, and young adults throughout the Pacific Northwest flourish with dignity and self-worth in the face of rejection and isolation.”



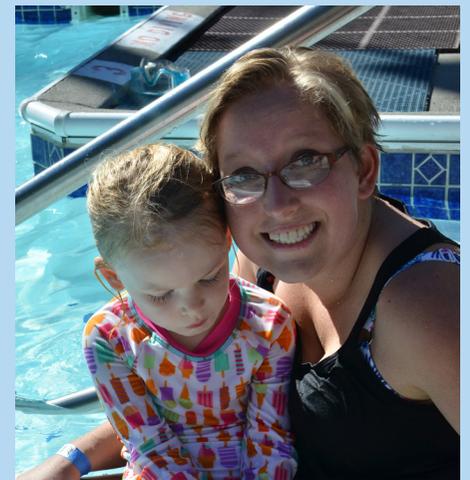
REACH:

Early Childhood

Most HIV-positive young children will not know the term “HIV” yet, because parents can’t be sure they will keep it private. They have more than the typical number of doctor appointments and blood draws. Children who struggle to swallow pills sometimes have a g-tube placed in the stomach, to maintain the necessary adherence to the lifesaving meds.

What the safe community of REACH means to them: Young children think that REACH camp is a super fun and friendly place, their counselors are the best, and they get to play outside, swim in a pool, and have adventures. Before they have a clue about the real depth of REACH, they know they belong and are loved.

“So. Much. Fun” - REACH Child



Elementary School

During elementary school, parents usually tell their child that they have something called “HIV.” If the child has heard of it, in health class or elsewhere, they often feel fear and dread. If they have never heard of it, they may feel bewildered and confused. Parents inform the child that they need to keep this information private. They reassure them that it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Nonetheless, the child feels the burden

of secrecy placed on their shoulders. Children start to feel different. Even the simple pleasures of childhood, such as sleepovers, are a struggle because they don’t want friends asking what all the pills are for. They fear accidentally blurting out “HIV” to a friend or worry about getting injured and bleeding at school.



What the safe community of REACH means to them: Kids’ friendships at

REACH start to mean a lot. They like the fact that other families look like theirs at camp, and other kids take pills too. They flourish from the attention of their camp counselors. They may not talk about HIV, but they now understand why REACH exists. They know that HIV doesn’t have to stay a secret here – if they decide to talk about it, no one will misunderstand, be afraid of them, or reject them. They are accepted 100% as they are.

“[At camp] people wanted me around.” – REACH child



COMMUNITY FOR A LIFETIME

Middle and High School

Developmentally, children this age are peer-focused. They enjoy time away from parents and want to be with their social circles. They may tire of constant doctor appointments and daily pill-taking regimens. Some begin to skip doses. A few may try sharing their HIV status with a trusted friend. If their friend betrays the trust, they will face painful rejection and malicious gossip. They may be bullied or feared, and people may stop touching them – even to give a high five or a hug. As these teens think about the future, they wonder if they will be able to get married or have children.

What the safe community of REACH means to them: At REACH camp, teens spend most of their days having great fun with friends and deep talks with their counselors. Camp is a chance to debrief about their year, including their experiences with disclosing their status. They know that there will be someone who can say, “Me too,” and empathize with them. REACH is the one place they truly feel safe.

“I can be who I am around other people.”
– New teen at Camp 2017

Young Adulthood

This is one of the rockiest seasons of life for children growing up with HIV as they face the daunting transition from pediatric to adult HIV healthcare. Now it's up to them to schedule appointments, arrange transportation, and request prescription refills. For some, years of stigma and rejection cause excruciating psychological pain, leading to an intense drive to say, “No more pills. Forever is too long. I want to be done with this.” They ask themselves what would actually happen if they just stopped taking the pills. Some experiment with the idea. Inevitably, their immune systems deplete. In response, some get serious about their health, take their meds, and bounce back. For others, their immune systems become so weakened they are unable to recover.

What the safe community of REACH means to them: Young adults find great meaning in the intergenerational nature of the REACH community. They have older adults who are like big brothers or sisters, aunts, uncles, or even grandparents. They also take pride in being a role model for the younger kids, embodying the REACH culture of acceptance, safety, trust, and joy. They come fully alive at Camp, and our community wouldn't be the same without them.

“REACH came into my life at just the right time. It gave me something to live for.” – REACH young adult



Break Out Session at Camp

Creative Expressions allow teens to choose from a menu of options that include visual art, photography, and music. Knowing that Camp is a safe place to reveal a personal side of themselves, teens express it boldly through art.

Led by a REACH volunteer, who also happens to be a musician, a group of teens created a song from scratch, including original lyrics and their own music and voices.



They performed “Expectations” at the camp talent show. You can scan this QR code to listen:



Expectations © 9.3.2017

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