

My Kudzu Experience

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In March of 2001, at the age of 10, I sat terrified in a hospital room at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta after being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. I still remember the fear and anxiety that surrounded my every thought during that hospital stay. The next few months consisted of me regularly hiding out in the pantry so my parents couldn't give me shots or check my blood sugar. I cried all the time and could not understand why something so huge had happened to me and not to my sisters or any other child I know. I had two distant cousins who had type 1 diabetes, but they were significantly older than me so I did not talk to them about what I was feeling. Then a miracle happened: my endocrinologist told my parents about Camp Kudzu, a camp that had begun just the year before that was for children with type 1 diabetes. Camp would be held in July and there was a space for me, so my parents decided to send me. I was extremely angry with them for sending me away for a week: in my mind it was just one more thing diabetes "forced" me to do. I sobbed as my parents walked away from me after setting up my bed in Cabin 3.



Throughout that week, however, I was no longer the scared little girl hiding in the pantry. I was suddenly brave and motivated to take care of my diabetes and be healthy. I was surrounded by people of all ages with T1D who did not let diabetes hold them back. I made so many friends with my cabin-mates, some of whom I still consider to be my best friends. I developed connections with adults who had lived with type 1 for the majority of their lives who were healthy, happy, and thriving. When my parents came to pick me up from camp that

week, I sobbed again. But this time I cried because I didn't want to leave the one place I felt truly "normal." I have come to learn that having type 1 does not make me abnormal, it makes me stronger, more responsible, and has truly shaped me into the person I am today.

I continued to return to Camp Kudzu every summer. Camp Kudzu continued to help me grow and develop the skills I needed to take care of my diabetes and not let it hold me back from anything. Without Camp Kudzu, I would still be that scared little girl who felt like her life was over. Camp helped me take my life back into my own hands and use the obstacles that faced me to build me up higher and help me become a better person. Once I was old enough, I began volunteering as a counselor. Being a counselor was the most rewarding thing I had done up until that point in my life. Giving back to the place that changed my entire life for the better was such an amazing feeling.

After graduating from college, I was even privileged enough to work for Camp Kudzu for a year, where I was able to grow and learn even more. I left my position at Camp Kudzu in 2014

to pursue my Masters Degree in Social Work. I had always had a desire to help children with chronic illness the way Camp Kudzu helped me, so social work seemed like the next logical step to take. My favorite memory from Camp Kudzu was the summer during graduate school, when I was able to return to Camp as the Camper Life Specialist and use my degree to help the place that was nearest and dearest to my heart! After graduating and gaining my license, I began to work at a camp in South Carolina for children battling cancer, all thanks to Camp Kudzu.



I got married in May of 2017, with nearly 20 Camp Kudzu friends and loved ones in attendance. My husband and I wanted to start a family of our own, but having a baby while being type 1 scared me more than anything I had faced yet. Luckily, using the skills that Camp Kudzu taught me, I overcame my fear and we are now expecting our first child, a boy, in March of 2019. My high-risk OB/GYN told me at my last appointment that I was the healthiest type 1 patient he had ever had. There is no doubt in my mind that I owe it all to Camp Kudzu. I can't wait to share with my son the lessons that I learned at Camp, and to encourage him to volunteer when he is old enough. Thank you, Camp Kudzu, for making my life so fulfilling!