Camp reconnects separated siblings

Youths savor family ties amid summer fun.

Brothers, sisters divided by foster care learn from and help each other.

By Helena Oliviero
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Chase, a 13-year-old with floppy blond hair, jumps to his feet, grabs the string mop and shouts, “Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!” The main target of Chase’s taunting is his older sister, Amber, who resides in a losing cabin.

“We did it!” Chase says, waving the symbolic “golden” mop in the air.

Rarely has sibling rivalry felt so delicious – to Chase, to Amber and to all those watching on. This is Camp To Belong Georgia, a summer camp that reunites brothers and sisters who have been separated by foster care.

Outside, in the real world, most of the campers live in group homes or with a series of temporary guardians, having been removed from their families because of neglect or abuse. But here in Rutledge, where they borrow Camp Twin Lakes for one week, they get to build – in many cases rebuild – something familiar. Here, they work to establish the common foundation that would have come from playing together and being mischievous together and growing up together.

Reunited brothers and sisters sit together at meals. They fish together. They sing. And dance. And cry.

Like Amber, they also do what comes naturally: They put little brothers in their place.

As Chase holds up the golden mop, Amber shakes a head of long hair – blond like her brother’s. But she doesn’t let him see envy as their green eyes meet.

“The mop,” says Amber, 14, “looks more silver to me.”

Siblings divided

Dropped off by buses on Sunday, the campers arrive toting duffel bags – nervous and anxious, yet hopeful that they can strengthen tenuous ties.

About 10,000 Georgia kids live in foster care, and 40 percent of them have been separated from their siblings, according to the state Division of Family and Children Services.

Some of the brothers and sisters were split up recently. Others were divided long ago – and, by now, some have even been adopted by different families. For some of them, they are no closer to their siblings than distant cousins who get together every few years at a family reunion.
While keeping family members together is ideal, it's also difficult to do. Foster parents often have limited space and resources, and handling just one child with behavioral and emotional issues can be hard enough.

Still, dividing siblings can deepen the heartache and separation anxiety for children who have already lost parents and are sometimes reeling from beatings, sexual abuse or abandonment.

Among other things, camp organizers hope nurturing strong sibling connections will help each camper heal faster and build healthy, lasting relationships in the future.

Amber and Chase live only about 15 miles apart, just north of Atlanta. They have recently been adopted by different families. They see each other a few times a year, getting together to go shopping at a mall or meeting up at Six Flags. And this marks their second time at camp.

Amber arrives at camp wearing a sparkling necklace with the letter "A," given to her by her brother last year.
"There are matching earrings, but they are too fancy for camp," she adds.

Chase is giddy to be here. He looks up to his sister, who seems much older than the one year separating them. A pretty girl, she is composed and feels comfortable blending in the crowd. Chase revels in being the center of attention. He also wants to be helpful, filling up fellow campers' water bottles, surprising counselors with cups of sweet tea. Sensitive, he also is easily rattled.

Last year, Chase lost his temper at least once a day. So, while Amber looked forward to coming to camp, she also was nervous.

A year ago, Chase fell apart if he didn't like the sandwiches served in the dining hall. Once, he broke down when he thought a cabinmate was trying to steal his soccer ball.

Amber knows why Chase struggles with controlling his anger. She said he was the target of most of the physical abuse.

"I know what he's gone through," says Amber. "And he had it a lot tougher than me. I got hurt, too, but I mostly watched what was going on. I love him no matter what. And this camp allows us to really have quality time together. We can make good memories."

Troubled past

Authorities were first tipped off about the trouble in the youngsters' home after Chase showed up at school with bruises, and school officials reported it.

Amber was 6, and Chase was 5 when they, along with a baby brother, were removed from their Woodstock home, according to court documents. In cutting off parental rights in January 2005, the courts charged the family's parents with not supervising the children, maintaining inadequate living quarters and domestic violence.

Amber's adoptive mom remembers seeing a photograph of the kitchen in the DFCS file. The only items inside the refrigerator were a bottle of diet Coke and an empty pizza box. A dead dog was lying on the floor.

For the first few years, Amber and Chase endured the system together. They were placed in several homes, eventually landing with Roxene and Michael.

The couple had been prompted to take in foster children by their son, who was 12 at the time. For him, it was simple: They had the room.

Eventually the couple put aside their concerns and decided to open their home to Chase and Amber. All they really need is love, Roxene thought.

But love is not always enough. Chase's anger was uncontrollable. Sometimes, asked to put away his laundry, he gladly did it. Other times, he would become enraged to the point of rolling on the floor or kicking down doors.

"At some point, I had to look at the effect this was having on the entire family," Roxene says. "And we just couldn't do it anymore."

They decided to keep Amber. But Chase, the couple concluded, needed more help than they could give.

It was hard to separate, Amber says, even though she understood.

Adjusting to her new family was hard at first. Amber was petrified of the dark, water and being a disappointment.

When she first came, she said, she was nervous whenever she did something wrong.

"I used to think that when they got upset with me, they didn't love me," Amber says. "But then I realized they are just trying to teach me a lesson. And they are here for me forever. And that they love me no matter what."

Over time, she began to thrive, gradually feeling more secure. Her grades improved to all A's and B's. She took up the clarinet and started volunteering with children with special needs at her school.

In November 2006, Roxene and Michael adopted Amber, throwing a big party and serving ice cream cake.

"I remember it was five days before my 12th birthday, and my mom and dad asked if I wanted to be adopted, and I was so happy," she says. "It was the best feeling because I realized I was really wanted."

Meanwhile, Chase, who had been living at Murphy Harpst, a residential treatment center for children with behavioral and emotional issues, also found a permanent home.
Bonding again

At Camp To Belong, Amber and Chase compete in relay races and horseback riding.

“Go Amber! Go Amber! You can do it!” cheers Chase as his sister gallops off on horseback, trying to catch up with a basketball. His eyes lock on his sister. Dusty and sweaty in the sweltering heat, Amber and Chase flash each other grins and give high-fives.

In this moment, they are playful. But in a week teeming with all kinds of emotions, the tone can quickly change.

On closing day, shortly after the campers take turns going down the water slide, the brothers and sisters present handmade pillows to each other as keepsakes. Some pillows feature hearts and smiley faces; others had deeply personal messages written on the fabric.

Making and exchanging the pillows is part of an activity designed to help the kids open up. Some campers simply read the messages on their pillows to their siblings; others reveal the intense feelings behind those messages.

Chase proudly clutches a pillow he made for Amber out of cream-colored fabric adorned with cherries. Face flush, he lifts it up and reads aloud what he wrote in black permanent marker.

“I love you Amber. You gave me dreams. I want you to know I will be by your side. When you are alone, I will still be by your side. By Chase.”

Amber smiles on the verge of tears. She turns to Chase and reads aloud the words scrolled across the pale green pillow she made for him:

“Chase, I love you! I always will. No matter what happens! You rock! Amber.”

They embrace loosely and sit down. They listen intently and weep when they hear other kids’ stories. One pre-teen girl stands up and tells of coming home from school one day and finding her mother dead in the backyard. She said she had gotten into an argument with her mother that morning and never had a chance to say she was sorry. She collapses into tears. Her sister grabs and holds her tightly and virtually every child, every counselor cries with them.

Feeling ‘very whole’

Wearing red rubber wristbands saying “Camp To Belong 2009,” Amber and Chase wake up at 7 a.m. Friday for the closing ceremony. One day, they hope, their baby brother, the one they’ve lost contact with, will join them.

At the start of camp, some of the 32 participants had major trepidation. Some could be heard saying “This is stupid” as they got off the bus.

But five days later, they’re in sync with the camp concept and, more importantly, each other. Standing in neat rows, and smiling proudly, they belt out the lyrics of R. Kelly’s “World’s Greatest,” piped through loudspeakers in the rustic media building.

In unison, they point to the sky. They hold out their arms and pretend to soar like airplanes. They flex their muscles.
Amber and Chase cup their hands around their eyes like goggles and eye each other as they sing, “I am a vision. I can see clearly. If anybody asks you who I am, just stand up tall, look ’em in the face and say, I’m that star up in the sky, I’m that mountain peak up high.”

They may have different moms and dads now. But they will always be brother and sister.

“If I didn’t get to see my brother I would feel like a piece of me is missing,” Amber says. “But now that I have a mom and dad and get to see Chase, I don’t feel like anything is missing anymore. I feel very whole.”

About Camp To Belong

• Camp To Belong was started in 1995 in Las Vegas by Lynn Price, who lived in foster care as a child.

• Last summer, Jennifer Thomas of Acworth started the camp in Georgia for children between the ages of 8 and 18 after she adopted two siblings she had cared for as a foster parent. Thomas was looking for a way for her son and daughter to reconnect with their two biological sisters, thereby easing separation anxieties and helping them to form healthy future relationships.

• Thomas and other volunteers organize golf tournaments and other fund-raisers to help cover the costs of the camp. The camp also depends on volunteer counselors, which includes some adults who grew up in foster care.

• For more information about Camp To Belong Georgia, go to www.camptobelong-ga.org

How We Got This Story

• AJC reporter Helena Oliviero spent three days at Camp To Belong. She interviewed Chase, Amber and their adoptive parents, as well as other campers. She also reviewed court and Division of Family and Children Service documents provided by the parents.

• Though the AJC is using photographs of the children, the newspaper has chosen not to use the full names of Chase and Amber and their new parents to protect the children’s identities.
Chase (top), 13, and Amber, 14, tackle a climbing wall at Camp To Belong in Rutledge. The siblings, who were separated in foster care and have each been adopted by different families, reunited for a second year at the camp recently. The organizers' goal at the camp is to nurture sibling connections and to help build healthy, lasting relationships for the siblings' future. Photos by Bita Honarvar bhonarvar@ajc.com