

# GOING

GRATITUDE  
REPORT 2023

# BEYOND



HEALING THROUGH HAPPINESS

Dear supporter,

As Campfire Circle celebrates its 40th anniversary, we want to thank you for your generosity in helping us reach more children and families than ever. Your support of Campfire Circle gives kids with cancer or serious illness the opportunity to experience joy and laughter. But your impact goes far beyond that.

In this year's Gratitude Report, you will read about the healing power of your support. A diagnosis changes the trajectory of a child's life and affects the whole family. Not only do kids miss out on childhood experiences they experience a profound mental health impact and social isolation.

You help Campfire Circle foster friendships that grow into communities and build confidence that extends into adulthood. Through our in-hospital, community and overnight camp programs, you are fostering resilience, well-being and hope – and that impact is measurable.

We are excited to share some exciting highlights from a new research study with Trent University, along with moving stories from the past year to show you how you are going above and beyond for kids who need you most. On behalf of Campfire Circle, I want to express our heartfelt gratitude to the incredible donors, volunteers, campers, and families who breathe life into our mission and make our community thrive. Together, we are healing through happiness.

Thank you for being part of our circle.

With gratitude,



Alex Robertson  
CEO, Campfire Circle



# HEALING THROUGH HAPPINESS



## TRENT UNIVERSITY STUDY HIGHLIGHTS PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF CAMP

In 2022, Campfire Circle partnered with researchers from Trent University to study the psychosocial outcomes of overnight camp for kids with cancer who often miss out on childhood experiences due to their diagnosis. The research team included

Sarah O'Connell, former camp volunteer and Master of Science student, led by Dr. Sarah West, Associate Dean of Science and Associate Professor of Kinesiology & Biology at Trent University.

**“We predicted that attending a two-week oncology camp would be associated with higher levels of hope, resilience, and mental well-being, and lower levels of stress in kids who have or have had cancer,” says Dr. Sarah West**

The study gathered data through validated surveys and saliva cortisol tests during one camp session. Surveys were taken on the first day of camp, the last full day of camp, and three months after camp.

## It had exciting findings in four key areas of psychosocial indicators:

### RESILIENCE

Children with cancer face a myriad of psychological, social, and physical challenges. Resilience, or the ability to adapt to significant adversity, is critical to a child's long-term outcome. Levels of resilience in children were high at camp, as evaluated by The Child and Youth Resilience Measure. The Trent team found a clinically significant change in resilience between when kids were at camp versus when they were back in their regular environments. **"These high levels of resilience while at camp are a really positive finding,"** says Dr. West.



### HOPE

Hope plays an important role in healing and resilience. The Trent team found that children had statistically significant higher levels of hope at camp than at home, according to the Children's Hope Scale. During camp, kids are highly motivated to pursue their goals and figure out ways to achieve them. **"A lot of the time, cancer and cancer treatment disrupts children's progressions towards goals, and camp is a time for them to reset,"** says Dr. West.



### SOCIAL SUPPORT

**"A lot of childhood cancer patients report feeling socially isolated or lonely during treatment and often report having a hard time maintaining friendships during this time,"** says Dr. West. While at camp, children reported high levels of well-being and social support and these levels remained high even three months post camp. **"The fact that we are seeing relatively long-term high levels of social support at this time is really promising,"** says Dr. West.



### STRESS

The research team measured cortisol levels (the stress hormone) in kids and found they had healthy, normal levels of stress while at camp, indicating that camp was not a stressful experience for campers.

**"Overall, we concluded that the camp experience is associated with excellent psychosocial health in childhood cancer patients,"** says Dr. West. **"Camp is a positive and supportive environment for this patient population."**



**This study will be used to further inform Campfire Circle's evidence-based programming to promote improved long-term outcomes for our campers. With your support, we are helping more kids and families over the long-term.**

# OVERNIGHT CAMP

## MUSKOKA



Thanks to our generous donors, our overnight camps were buzzing with activity and the joyous sounds of kids being kids, a reminder that camp has never been more essential. With record attendance this summer, our dedicated team worked tirelessly to ensure that every child and family had the opportunity to create cherished memories.

At Muskoka, our Program Director told us that at one point this summer, every table in the dining hall was in use, every canoe paddle was checked out, and all of our program areas were full of kids having a blast. We have also seen a huge increase in interest from our teen campers. This year, we had the largest number of Leader-In-Training campers ever. Teens affected by cancer often miss out on major milestones like high school and first jobs that help them develop the critical social and emotional skills needed to thrive in the future. The isolation and stress created during the pandemic have only intensified this. Camp offers a unique and inclusive opportunity to learn new skills in a safe and medically supported environment.

This summer, we had three Camper-Only Camps plus Teen Camp (7Scape), two Sibling-Only Camps, One Bereaved Sibling Camp, and multiple



Doctors and nurses at our **on-site hospital, the Med Shed**, distributed

# 5,524

medications this summer.

ongoing Leader-In-Training Programs and Trips, with approximately 90-120 campers each session. While certain programs, like the bereaved family session, required two nurses, other programs, like the teen-only session, required seven nurses to account for the session's acuity.

# OVERNIGHT CAMP

## RAINBOW LAKE



Caregivers of children with chronic conditions are:

**75%**

more likely to have depression

and

**40%**

more likely to have anxiety

**Family camp provides much-needed respite.**



At Rainbow Lake (Waterford, ON), we had nine weeklong family camp sessions this summer. Family camp helps families reconnect and participate in accessible activities with their kids, and it also provides some special moments for both kids and caregivers. During “split dinner” night, the family guides look after the campers during dinnertime so caregivers can have a night off. One couple told us they hadn’t had a date night since camp the previous year and they felt so relaxed knowing their family guide and staff were helping with their high-needs camper.

**“Camp is where my teen can be their best and authentic self. That ability to climb mountains (rock walls) literally is reflected in the way they carry themselves when they return.”**

# A PLACE FOR EVERYONE



At Campfire Circle, accessibility is critical to us and our campers. To provide the full camp experience to kids and families of all abilities, we are constantly making accessibility improvements. The new, barrier-free fishing dock at Campfire Circle Rainbow Lake is just one example. The wheelchair-accessible dock has a landing that is graded right to the shoreline for easy access. The two-height railings allow campers in wheelchairs to rest fully against the edge of the dock without having a bench as a barrier, while the canopy provides kids with photosensitivity the access to both water and shade. The new dock quickly became one of the most popular activities for families. At Rainbow Lake, we also installed a wheelchair lift at our outdoor pool, so campers with mobility devices can safely get in and out of the water.

Thanks to supporters like you, we can ensure all kids have the same opportunities.

“**Camp has been a most amazing part of our family’s lives. We have made lifelong memories here. It warms our hearts to see how ALL the needs of children and families are met so ALL can participate in ALL activities!**”

# BRINGING JOY

# TO THE BEDSIDE

Campfire Circle is the trusted mental well-being and play partner to Ontario's leading paediatric hospitals and delivers programming on hospital floors across the province. We continue to provide programming for oncology patients and we are excited to share that this past year we have been working with our hospital partners to serve even more children with serious illness.

At SickKids, Campfire Circle creates hospital programming for haematology/oncology patients on the 8th floor and for outpatients in the clinic. This year, the team expanded to the 6th floor, supporting children with serious illnesses such as multi-organ transplants and medical specialties. Group programming is now back in full swing at SickKids, meaning kids of all ages can gather in The Cabin, Campfire Circle's dedicated programming space, every day for a themed group program. Campfire Circle was asked to host a hospital-wide camp week for all patients. The Campfire Circle team met more than 530 campers in one week alone. Themed as a "canoe trip" around the hospital, each day staff visited a new whimsical place, delivering themed crafts and activities to any child across the hospital.

Both McMaster Children's Hospital and Children's Hospital at London Health Sciences Centre hosted their own camp weeks this summer. Themed around Mario Kart, campers made their own karts and tracks, created crafts and had Mario-themed scavenger hunts! The team even set up a Mario Kart tournament in the nurses' break room at McMaster, helping to bring joy (and a fun competitive spirit) to the nursing team. We also provide programming at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), two days a week, and bring the camp experience to CHEO's inpatient units and outpatient clinics two to three times a year through a camp week.

“Every memory of being in the hospital involves Campfire Circle and having fun which has resulted in him being well adjusted and so comfortable in himself and with his challenges.”



# FOSTERING FUTURE LEADERS

Our Leadership Programs were in high demand this summer, and we had the largest number of Leaders-In-Training participants at Muskoka ever. We were so happy to be able to serve those 17-18-year-olds and provide them with practical leadership experiences as they worked alongside experienced and skilled cabin counsellors and activity leaders.

Youth have been particularly impacted over the past three years. Adolescents and young adults who experience a diagnosis of cancer or serious illness often face physical and mental lifelong consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders. Years of treatment often exclude these youth from developing critical psychosocial skills such as building autonomy, peer relationships, creative expression, and self-confidence. The pandemic intensified the impact of this by limiting access to services and activities for youth, affecting their social and emotional development, and well-being.

Our year-round Leadership Programs fill these gaps, promoting healthy adolescent development through intentional and inclusive programming that supports participants into adulthood. We offer youth ages 15-18 on active treatment or requiring complex medical care the opportunity to learn new skills in a safe and medically supportive environment year-round.

Some highlights included Career Day, which took place in April. Campers spent the day learning about resume building, interview skills, and job-hunting strategies from industry professionals in a variety of job fields. Members of our community and past campers talked about different opportunities and non-traditional career paths. We had 45 teen campers in attendance.



This summer, we had a 16-year-old High School Credit camper who was partially paralyzed as a result of her cancer treatment. Her goal was to make it through the canoe trip, which included an 800-metre portage. This was a huge challenge for her as she doesn't have any function in her hands. The Muskoka overnight team worked collaboratively with her to help adapt the trip and make it as accessible as possible. She was so happy she was able to go on the trip and her counsellor noted how the experience visibly boosted her confidence. She was able to meaningfully participate in all three weeks of camp and complete a Grade 11 Health and Physical Education credit, something she may not have been able to do in a traditional high school gym program.

**According to a recent camper alumni survey,**

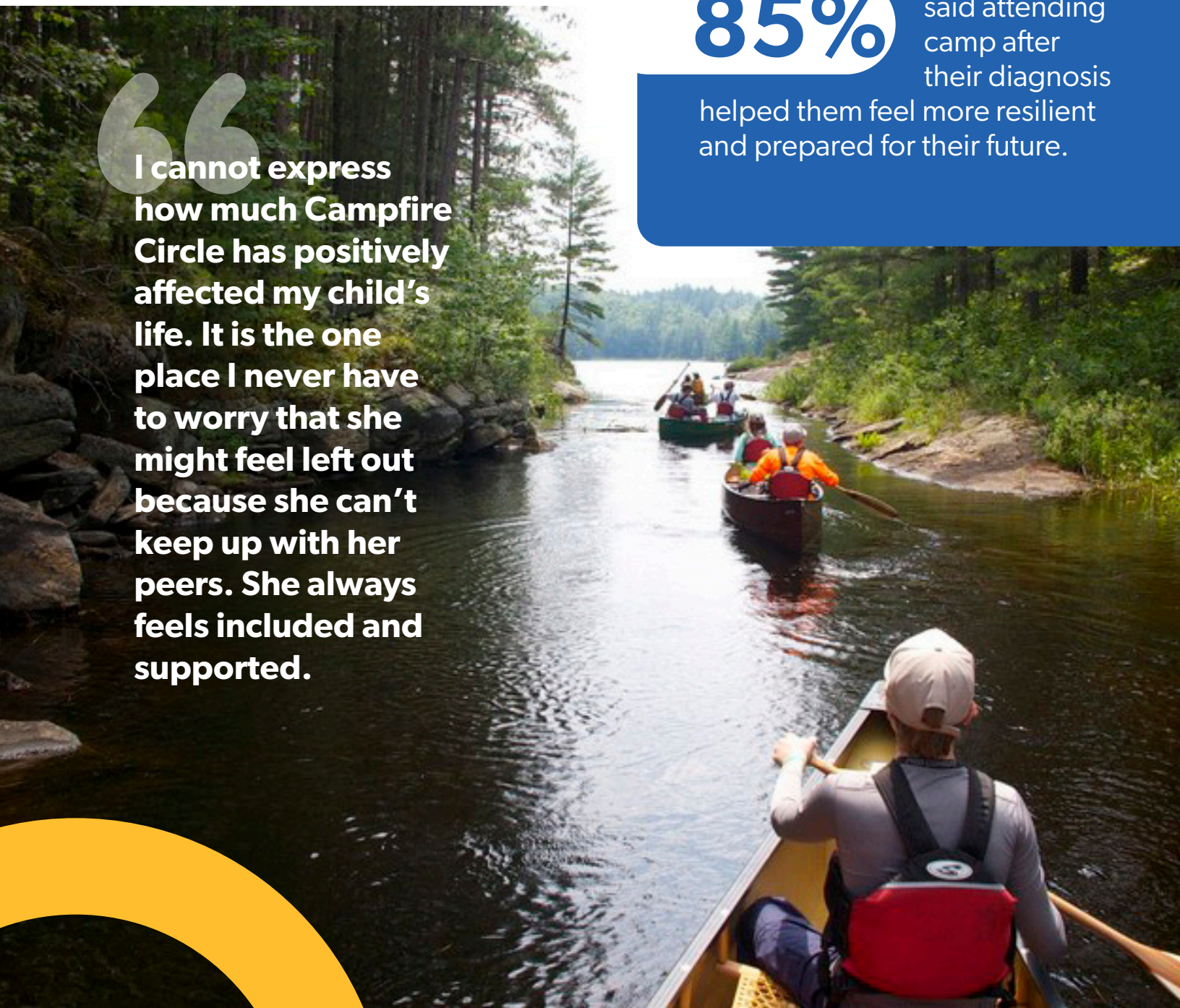
**98%** of alumni said their camp experience had a positive impact on their mental health and well-being;

**and**

**85%** said attending camp after their diagnosis helped them feel more resilient and prepared for their future.

“

**I cannot express how much Campfire Circle has positively affected my child's life. It is the one place I never have to worry that she might feel left out because she can't keep up with her peers. She always feels included and supported.**



Our leadership campers told us what they thought about camp in their feedback, and it says it all:

“

**I learned how to advocate for myself, through teamwork and camping skills like tent building.**

“

**The program supported my growth and development of real-world skills, like learning how to cook, and clean up dishes. It helped me realize the importance of building these competencies that I will need in the future.**

“

**I learned how to lead and how to work in a group effectively.**

“

**It has impacted my personal growth and development by helping me realize my strengths and areas of improvement.**

“

**I learned new things about myself throughout the duration of the program, and it led me to grow into a stronger, more professional leader.**

“

**I am more confident in my leadership and social skills.**

# THANK YOU!

With your support, we are providing critical programming for children with cancer or serious illness and their families.

Thank you for your incredible generosity.

[campfirecircle.org](http://campfirecircle.org)



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CIRCLE**

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