

Rachel Kudobe  
4/11/07  
Professor Groninga  
EN 112

### Just Keep Smiling

*What am I getting myself into?* I wondered as I watched the first few campers begin to arrive. One of the first was a girl a few years younger than me who had autism accompanied by other disabilities. “This is Ella,” Allison told me, as she wrapped a wristband around her arm. “Ella really likes it when you clap your hands together. Watch.” Allison began to clap her hands, and Ella giggled, clutching her wrists as she moved them back and forth.

Weeks before, Allison mentioned Camp Courageous to me as a possible summer job. Camp Courageous is a summer camp which kids with disabilities can attend. She told me I could volunteer for a respite weekend in February, just to get a feel for what the camp was like before deciding to work there. I figured it would be a really great experience for me, especially since I’m majoring in music therapy and I haven’t had much experience around people with disabilities.

However, as I watched the campers arriving, I started getting nervous. The fact that I had not been around too many people with special needs was bothering me. How am I supposed to act? What am I supposed to do? I had no idea. There was a total of nine campers who arrived Friday night for the weekend, with five workers and myself as a volunteer. Allison introduced me briefly to each camper as they came in the doors with their parents.

I helped some of the parents carry their children’s luggage to the lodge, and we made the beds as the parents said their goodbyes. Once they left, we took the kids over to the gym, where

we got some equipment out for them to play with.

Kudobe, 2

One of the little girls (I had trouble judging her age) became attached to me. Her name was Rachel as well, and she had some sort of a communication disorder and would not speak. If she was asked a question, she would shake her head or nod to answer. We rolled a ball back and forth on the floor for a while with another girl, Abby, who had a mild case of mental retardation.

That night, we dressed them for bed, and took our stations at the entrance to the lodge. One of the girls checked on the boys frequently while Allison checked on the girls. Apparently, during the night, one of the boys had a massive BM, which got all over his clothes and himself. They had to give him a shower at two o'clock in the morning and clean up his clothes. Allison decided not to wake me up for the wonderful event.

However, the next morning, around 6:30, I woke up to one of the boys, Carson, who had autism, dancing and talking in his own made-up language. He noticed I was awake, and he came and sat with me on the couch while the others slept. I remembered Allison telling me the night before that Carson likes to cuddle. I was a witness to this in the early morning hours. He felt the need to give me a kiss on the cheek a few times, which I'll admit was really cute. Then he talked with me in his own language, waving his hands around in the air and smiling back at me. I suddenly began to understand I didn't need to comprehend what he was trying to tell me. His smile said enough.

The day zoomed by with a trip to see the many animals (including lizards, fish, and ferrets), a craft-making session where we made rockets, and a few minutes outside sledding in the fresh snow. Our last activity before dinner was swimming in the pool. I helped Rachel into a

life jacket, and she held my hand tightly as we ventured into the warm water. She stayed by my side the entire time, silently watching the other kids. Every once in a while, she looked up and smiled at me.

Kudobe, 3

One of the workers came over and asked me to watch Ella because she kept wanting to get out of the pool. I went over to Ella and started clapping my hands together, remembering her favorite pastime. Immediately, she began laughing, and clasped onto my wrists, moving them together to keep me clapping. “She likes your beautiful smile, Rachel,” Allison told me. “Just keep smiling.”

When the campers’ parents came the following day to pick up the kids, I remember watching Ella cry as her dad picked up her luggage. A couple of the kids gave me hugs, and Carson gave me one of his infamous kisses on the cheek, then saying goodbye to us in his own words.

However the child who made the biggest impact on me was Rachel. Her mother came in to pick her up, and she knew she was leaving, so she ran up to me and gave me a big hug. She went back to her mom, and decided to come back to me again and give me one last hug. Then, something like a miracle happened. Little Rachel, who didn’t speak during the entire weekend, waved her little hand at me, and said, “Bye-bye.” Her mother smiled and said, “You’ll get to see her again, Rachel. She’s going to be working here this summer when you come for camp.” She turned to me. “Right?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling at Rachel. She turned back a few times to grin at me, and wave her cute, little hands before leaving the lodge, her eyes thanking me for volunteering my

time to help and play with her.

Looking back, I realize now how much more comfortable I feel around people with special needs. I definitely grew from the experience, mainly because I forced myself to step

Kudobe, 4

outside my comfort zone into something I never could see myself doing before. Somewhere along the line I found the courage to try something new, learned the meaning of service, and gained a summer job in the process.