

Treating children like royalty

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:37 NIV)

By Wayne and Diane Tesch

He wasn't the first young camper to ask the question — but it was startling just the same.

“How much are you getting paid?” he asked the “Grandma” at a Royal Family Kids' Camp™ one summer.

“What do you mean?” asked the older woman, who serves as a grandmotherly figure for the campers.

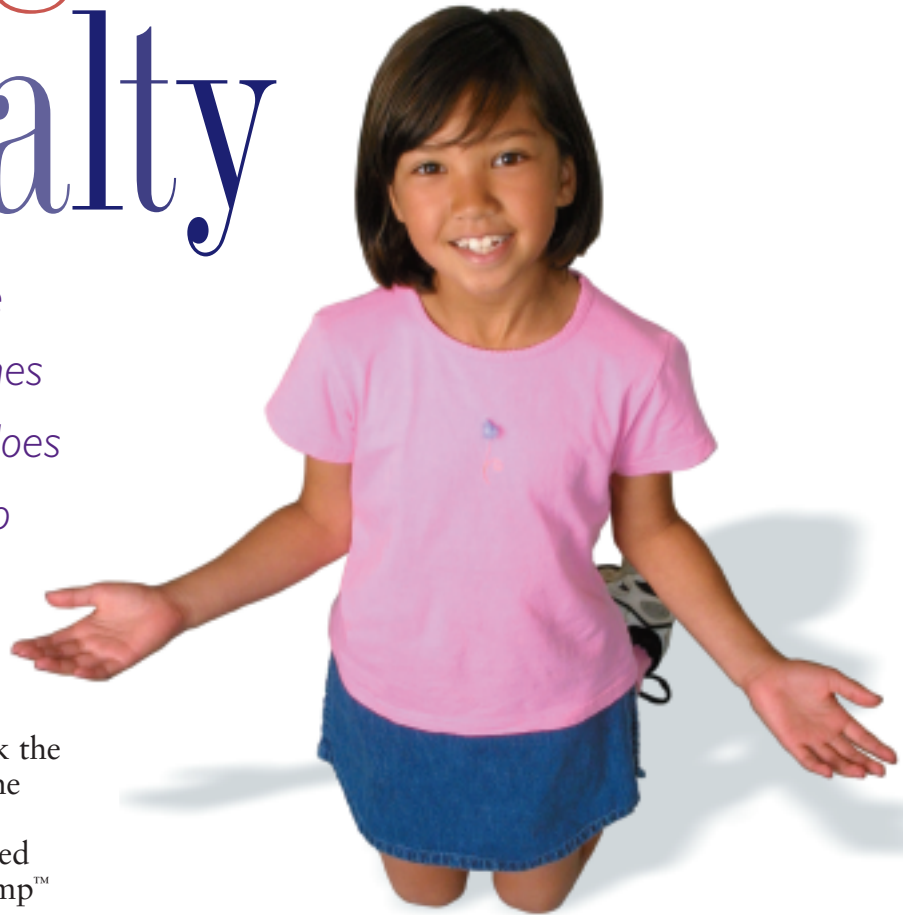
The little boy sighed. “Grandma, everybody who takes care of me gets paid,” he said. “My foster parents get paid. My social worker. My [therapist]. Everybody who loves me gets paid.”

Grandma knelt down and looked him in the eyes. This boy, like all the other campers, came from an abusive past. He was hungry for unconditional love — love that this “Grandma” was glad to provide.

“Everybody in this camp is volunteering,” she said. “We do it because we care about you. You are special to us!”

Hungry for love

When children come to Royal Family Kids' Camps, a nationwide network of week-long camps for abused and neglected children ages 7 to 11, they often struggle with the belief that *no*



one loves them. But after one week of healthy fun and care from trust-worthy adults, campers leave with a heart full of positive memories ... and a new self-identity as someone of great worth!

One camp counselor tells how his two boys — each counselor is assigned only two children for maximum interaction and attention — were complete opposites. If one liked games, the other hated them. If one liked basketball, the other hated all sports. While one liked to stay up late, the other was the first to rise in the morning. The boys, Roger and Danny, didn't even like to be around each other!

It was exhausting for the counselor. “My image of fun was changing — I realized that I would have to get smarter and really work on the hearts of these two,” he said. He prayed for patience

and energy, and asked God to give the boys the times of their lives.

The next day, Roger — the one who liked basketball — was shooting hoops with the camp’s “Grandpa.” Suddenly Danny ran off. After Grandpa agreed to play with Roger, the counselor chased after Danny ... and found him in a corner of the dining hall, curled in a ball, with his head between his legs.

The counselor got ready to lecture on the importance of staying together, when he noticed Danny was crying.

“Are you going to hit me now?” Danny asked, his eyes full of tears.

The counselor was taken aback. “No,” he said gently, “why would I ever want to hit you?”

“‘Cause everyone who has ever loved me has hit me,” Danny replied quietly. Together, they sat and cried.

“From that moment on,” the counselor shared later, “I realized that no matter how hard the camp might be on me, I would never understand how much harder it was on Danny. To be loved is a wonderful thing, and Royal Family Kids’ Camp made it possible for these two little boys (and one very big boy) to realize how far a little bit of God’s love can go.”

Abuse in America

The little boys in these stories are real children — and sadly, they are among the millions of kids who have been abused and mistreated in America.

In 2003 alone, close to one million children were confirmed to have been abused or neglected. More than half suffered neglect, nearly 20 percent were physically abused, and 10% were sexually abused, but abuse also included emotional abuse, medical neglect and other forms of maltreatment. More than 1,000 children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 2003.

Experts believe that only one out of every three abuse incidents is actually reported, which means

the actual incidence of child maltreatment could be three times as high as these numbers show.

The likelihood is that some of these hurting children live in your own community. And Royal Family Kids’ Camps is one way you can reach out to them with the healing, loving hands of God.

Creating positive memories

Royal Family Kids’ Camps began in 1985 with a single camp in Southern California. Today, RFKC is the leading network of camps for abused and neglected children with 152 camps, sponsored by local churches, operating in 37 U.S. states, in addition to new camps in Australia, the Philippines, South Africa and Singapore. This year we will welcome 5,800 campers, most of whom are in the foster care system of their states.

To date, nearly 34,000 children have participated in our camps where we have given them positive memories to cherish for the rest of their lives. We background screen, interview and train our counselors and staff, keeping the camper-to-counselor ratio at 2 to 1 so children can get plenty of love and attention. Our campers enjoy new experiences, such as horseback riding or swimming, and because many of these children have never celebrated their birthday, each camp hosts an Everybody’s



Birthday Party with the traditional cake, singing, fun — and even birthday gifts, provided by individuals and congregations across the country.

Each camper takes home a Memory Bag, filled with RFKC goodies, a children's Bible, an audiocassette of Camp songs, and a photo album of their week at Camp. These bags are priceless treasures, particularly because many of our campers, due to the circumstances in which they were removed from their homes, have no possessions of their own.

Best of all, they learn about a Heavenly Father who loves them, cherishes them, and will always be with them. They discover how to trust and hope again.

Church in action

Reaching out to these children requires a three-fold cord — (1) local churches with caring, compassionate people; (2) community children's service agencies, to provide campers; and (3) a local campground to provide the place and RFKC to provide training, guidance and empowerment to help a Camp get started.

It is the local church though that turns compassion into action to meet the needs of its community's abused children through a Royal Family Kids' Camp. Congregations supply the financial resources and manpower, as well as the passion to tangibly reach out with God's love and take a ministry "vacation with a purpose."

It is no exaggeration that Camp changes the lives of those who serve as volunteers at Camp. Over the years, scores of volunteers have told us stories of how their own faith was deepened by their Camp experience. Some have even found new areas of ministry after working with the children of RFKC. (More information about starting a Camp can be found at www.rfkc.org)

The impact on the children, of course, is powerful. Life-changing. Eternal.

'Changed my life'

Terry's story is proof-positive that RFKC radically touches the lives of our campers.

Eleven years ago, Terry came to Camp as a



frightened nine-year-old. The little girl had lived with her paranoid-schizophrenic mother in cars, in cheap hotel rooms and with abusive men. She had been malnourished and physically, emotionally and sexually abused. She had been taken away from her abusive mother and placed in a succession of foster homes.

Despite it all, she always hoped that someone, someday, would rescue her.

At Camp, Terry found hope.

"I had never known that there was a God who really loved me and wanted me as His own to love," she said. "I realized that I need Him, and I wanted the incredible love and life that He offers as a free gift."

Camp songs are among Terry's favorite memories. "I loved singing the camp songs," she said. "To this day, I remember most of (them)."

Her love of singing meant more than she knew. While at camp, Terry was inspired to use her voice to help people. She kept that dream. Now as a university student, she studies voice and counseling and plans to work in music therapy with trauma victims, especially children.

"My heart's desire is to share the wealth of God's amazing and extravagant love, by helping people in need with God's gift of music," she said.

In 2001, Terry returned to RKFC — but this time, she was a camp counselor, comforting and helping children like the girl she once was. Last year, Terry shared her testimony and a stunning acapella performance at the annual RFKC Celebration Banquet.

Like thousands of other children, Terry has found comfort and hope through the manifestation of God's love at Royal Family Kids' Camps.

"God has changed my life through the impact of Royal Family Kids' Camps," Terry said. "My present beloved family and friends, and the musical influence of singing in a professional children's choir, continued an important growing process that began with attending a single week at Royal Family Kids' Camp several years ago."

Resources: Child Welfare League of America "National Fact Sheet 2006" (www.cwla.org)