

What I Talk About When I Talk About Summer Camp

I was 20 when I was sexually assaulted by Sam, a fellow counselor at a summer camp for type one diabetics. I was good at my job. Sam was not. I worked 18 hours days, killed snakes with dull machetes on hiking trails, delivered insulin to hundreds of kids, and treated seizures. He broke rules, broke curfew, and messed up medical procedures. Four days after I told a supervisor, my attacker was fired.

I didn't think about Sam the rest of the summer. I loved my job. We created a place for children with an invisible illness to feel normal. We gave them the space to be carefree, confident — themselves. Not only was the work fulfilling beyond anything else I'd ever known, but my coworkers were my friends. They supported me and stood up for me in the days after Sam. I couldn't have asked for a better job, a more supportive team.

At the end of the summer, camp was all I could talk about. I told anyone who would listen about the things we did — dressing up, dances, watching a meteor shower on the roof in August, singing along to Fleetwood Mac. It wasn't until I'd been promoted that I learned there had been a situation similar to mine two years before. The girl had not been asked back. Her attacker worked there three more years. He'd been good at his job.

Summer camp seems to be a part of the American childhood experience — you have a camp story or know someone who does — as much as assault is part of a woman's. I felt secure and supported at summer camp, but it wasn't safe for everyone. Camp had been an escape from the troubles of the real world, a perfect place. Except there is no escaping sexism, toxic masculinity, or rape culture. There is only working to dismantle it.

I worked there two more years. When a male counselor suggested a tank top was too revealing for a 15 year old girl to wear in the 100 degree heat, I told him it was not the responsibility of a child to make him comfortable. I fought with the all-male leadership team when a boy's nails being painted resulted in a female counselor being reprimanded. I stocked bathrooms with tampons and pads where there had previously been none. I wanted to make camp the place I had always thought it was.

I still talk about camp, tell the story of driving a tractor for the first time or being surprised with a staff dance party on my 22nd birthday. But now the stories include its shortcomings. There are no perfect places. There are no perfect people, and one day we realize that which we idolize is imperfect, complicated. Messy. They can do both good and bad. That doesn't mean

we have to abandon them, but it does mean there's work to do. There are no perfect people, institutions, or places, but we can make better ones.