

Witness

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An Affirmation of Life
H.I.V. Kids & Summer Camp

Photos & Text
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The burden of AIDS falls heavy on anyone who carries the HIV virus. For children, the burden is far more tragic. In almost every situation, the transmission of the virus into their bodies is due to no fault of their own. Some get it via blood transfusion, most are born with it because their mother or father had AIDS. In addition to the physical ailments of the disease, the children confront a number of other daunting complications.

For one, many parents will not allow their children to play with a child who has HIV. Fear that their child will contract the virus keeps them away. This leaves a child with HIV without other children to play with or socialize. Their life is a solitary one outside the confines of their immediate family and care givers. The camp gives these children the rare opportunity to be 'just kids' without the stigma of AIDS. Everything at the camp is about the children. About having fun. About freedom without inhibition. About caring. About love.



Two organizations have been at the forefront of issues related to AIDS. One is Camp Birch in New York, the other is Camp Sunburst in California. Though each approaches the situation from a different philosophical point of view, their goals are very much the same. Ultimately, each seeks to create a sense of sanctuary. Here both the children and their families (who also attend), can forget the overbearing shadow of AIDS for awhile.

It is important to remember that AIDS is also a social disease in which everyone involved suffers. The families of children with HIV must also carry the burden of AIDS. The camps give special attention to those who are affected, as well as, those who are infected. Here siblings, mothers, fathers, relatives or guardians learn to live under this shadow. Therapy sessions focus on 'living with AIDS,' not dying of AIDS. The support services work to empower all of those individuals affected by the disease. The concept is to treat the whole person: body, mind and spirit.

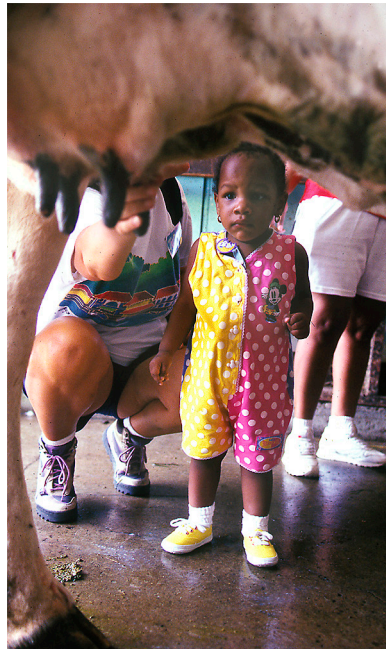




The children are a little apprehensive upon arrival. Their world until now has been generally isolated and small. The counselors work very hard in the beginning to gain their trust and annul some of their fears.

Everyone who works at the camps is special. In addition to the doctors, nurses, other medical personnel, therapists and administrators, there are the counselors. These individuals will live and work with the children on a daily basis for their entire stay. Most have had little or no experience working with AIDS patients. What brings them where is a simple desire to help – a need to ease the burden of others less fortunate. They come from all over the country to volunteer their time. Some have given up their vacation time to be here. Many pay their own expenses to reach the camps so they can work with children they have never met.





Over the last decade both camps have worked with hundreds of families. The Birch Family Camp is the largest residential camp in the United States. Both offer free one-week sessions for mostly inner-city families from low socioeconomic, underserved areas in New York and California. Each camp provides supportive and therapeutic environments where families can freely express their feelings about living with AIDS in an open and non-judgmental atmosphere. Both camps offer the children a variety of activities including swimming, hiking, fishing, arts and crafts, sports and campfires. Here the children are given an opportunity to just be kids.





A counselor and a child enjoy the simple pleasure of rowing in the sun and sharing some time together.



New medical advances have developed drug combinations that can keep patients alive longer and at the same time allow them to live healthier. However, it requires effort and discipline to make sure that all of the medications are taken properly. Every day, each child can take three to five different medications. A few take even more. At the camps, they can take them with almost no fanfare and go right back to playing.





When it really comes down to it -- the camps are about having fun and enjoying one another's company.





Saying goodbye at the end of the week is a very sensitive time for everyone. The bonds between the children, counselors, family members and camp staff have grown very deep. Many realize that they may never see one another again. It is a moment of honest caring and love.





Counselor blows a goodbye kiss to a departing child.

Approximately, every thirteen seconds someone new is infected with HIV. Today there are more than thirty million adults are infected with the virus. Another 2.5 million children are infected with the disease. To date, the epidemic has left behind 15.2 AIDS orphans.

This project is a production of

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Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of documentary photography and educational programming related to still photography.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, design, and education.

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