

Camp helps teens, young adults deal with terror trauma

MIDDLEBURG, Va. – In the morning, they talk about pain and loss. In the evening, it's s'mores and Tucked away in the lush green pastures of rural Virginia, 77 teens and young adults from the [USA](#) and eight other countries are spending this week at Project Common Bond, a camp where they're exploring their traumatic past while trying to create a peaceful future.

It's a camp that, on first thought, no one should want to be eligible to attend. Participants must have lost an immediate family member to a terrorist attack. Yet campers seem grateful and happy to be here.

"Because we've all been through something so traumatic and so similar but different at the same time, we all understand each other. And even though there are so many different languages, we all felt the same hurt that not everyone else understands," says Julie Griffin, 18, from Waldwick, N.J., whose father died in the north tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

The camp is sponsored by Tuesday's Children, a 9/11 victims organization. The first camp was held in 2008 and has met each year since in different locations, including [Northern Ireland](#) . This year, it's being hosted by the Foxcroft School, which during the academic year serves as a boarding and day school for girls.

Discussions, sports, dancing

Each summer, the teenagers, many of them returning, come to discuss their experiences while taking part in typical camp activities such as swimming, sports, campfires and dancing.

Though many of the participants lost family on 9/11, other attendees lost family members to terrorists in Northern Ireland, Russia, [Sri Lanka](#) , Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

The participants hold discussions in the morning and take part in recreational activities in the afternoon. The discussions are serious and can be difficult.

"The kids spoke about what it meant to learn about the death of Osama bin Laden," says Monica Meehan, director of curriculum for Common Bond. "Were they supposed to celebrate? Were they supposed to worry that something else was going to happen? Does this mean that their parent actually is really gone?"

This year, the camp is centered on the concept of dignity, and how dignity is both removed and how it can be built up, Meehan says. The camp is not designed to tell students what to feel, she says, but to help guide them through discussions about what they do feel.

"We're taking our horrible experiences that we all faced and taking them and changing them," Griffin says.

For Caitlin Leavey, the camp has helped change the trajectory of her life. Leavey, 20, a [New York University](#) junior from Westchester, N.Y., has attended the camp four times, but she says her first time at the camp influenced her decision to major in peace and conflict studies at NYU.

Leavey's father, a [New York City](#) firefighter, died on 9/11 during rescue efforts. Wearing an FDNY necklace, she speaks enthusiastically about wanting to help children.

"I want to work with kids affected by violence and war and terrorism," Leavey says. "And there's so much potential to bring together kids from all around the world who have this common bond, this common tragedy."

'Same pain, same struggle'

Fadwa and Farah Sarrawi are attending Common Bond for the first time. The two Palestinian

sisters from the [West Bank](#) said their father was killed during Israeli-Palestinian violence.

"In this camp, we have the same pain, we have the same struggle, we have the same conflict. And we're here together sharing our experience and our pain," Fadwa says.

Once a connection is formed at Common Bond, it's not easily broken. Griffin hosted a month-long stay for Davina Whiteside, a Northern Ireland teen whom she met at a previous Common Bond camp. The two have gone shopping, traveled to New York City and the [Jersey Shore](#) and have generally done "girl things," as they describe it.

Leavey says it's easy to stay in touch with other participants through Facebook. And for Griffin, the participants are people she can call for help, long after the last campfires have been put out and suitcases have been packed.

"Throughout the year, if you have trouble or something relating to your experiences, they're the ones that you call," she says.

"They're the ones that are there for you — even if you're not at camp."