

# 'It's so simple here. Everybody just gets it': The remarkable summer camp for the children of terror victims across the world

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They come from dramatically different cultures, and many don't even have a language in common.

But it doesn't matter to the 77 young people at a remarkable summer camp in Virginia, who each have a heartbreaking bond - they have all lost a loved one in a terrorist attack.

Project Common Bond started out as a way of bringing together children whose relatives died in the 9/11 attacks, but it's grown into an international project bringing together youths who have been scarred by terrorism.

One of those is 18-year-old Jason Vadhan, of Atlantic Beach, New York, whose grandmother was on United Flight 93.

When he arrived at the camp he didn't know anybody, but it didn't take him long to form profound relationships.

After he finished a roundtable and interviews with reporters last week, other campers gathered in an adjoining room and burst into applause when he walked in. He said: 'I came here not knowing one person, and when that door opened and there were people cheering for us, I walked right up to a kid I met three days ago, and I gave him a hug and I cried.'

Project Common Bond is organised by Tuesday's Children, a non-profit group dedicated to serving the families of 9/11 victims. But the camp has, over the years, taken on a more international focus.

This summer's eight-day camp, held on the campus of a girls' private school about 40 miles west of Washington, included participants from eight countries, including, for the first time, Russia and Sri Lanka. The camp brings together children from the opposite sides of many conflicts. Many of the campers, who range in age from 15 to 20, return each year for the friendships, the sense of community and the shared experiences. Their lives are shaped by extraordinary events, but at Project Common Bond, they feel normal. Julie Griffin, 19, whose father was killed on September 11, said: 'It's so simple here. Everybody just gets it.'

Losing a relative to terrorism is different because the tragedy plays out in public, said Fran Furman, director of counselling at Tuesday's Children.

She said: 'You're unique in a way that you didn't choose to be unique. It's very, very difficult to feel like you can connect and bond with other teens.' Yet at the camps, close relationships form instantaneously. 'There's that deep connection,' said Caitin Leavey, 20, whose father, a firefighter, died while responding to the World Trade Center attack.

She said: 'One of my friends doesn't speak English, and I'm still able to communicate with her and make a lasting friendship. I think that's amazing.'

In the mornings, campers attend classes and group discussions on peacemaking and conflict resolution.

This year's theme was dignity: how terrorists took it away; how they can reclaim it; and how they can encourage it in others.

Some have even chosen conflict resolution as a college major or career path based on their camp experiences.

'I wanted to turn my tragedy into something positive,' said Caitlin, who's majoring in peace and conflict studies at New York University and wears a necklace with the name of her father's fire company, Ladder 15. Afternoons at the camp are all about fun, with sports, drama, music, art and dance.

Mijal Tenenbaum wasn't sure fun would be part of the experience when she attended last year's camp in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Mijal, a 17-year-old from Argentina whose father was killed in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, said: 'I thought it would be weird, that we would be here and be awkward all the time because there would be this big elephant in the room that we would not talk about.'

But when she arrived, she said, 'it felt amazing'.

Another gathering for children of 9/11 victims, called America's Camp, will be held in two weeks in Hinsdale, Massachusetts. But Project Common Bond is the only one with international participants.

The tenth anniversary of September 11 has not been a major focus of this year's camp, although a few campers are painting a mailbox that will be installed at the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero, serving as a symbolic receptacle for messages of peace from around the world.

The killing of Al Qaeda mastermind Osama Bin Laden, on the other hand, has come up frequently.

The responses have been wide-ranging, said Monica Meehan McNamara, a family therapist and scholar who designs the curriculum for the camp.

Some said they were happy and wanted to celebrate, while others argued another killing wouldn't solve anything.

Marie Clyne, 21, a camp counsellor from Lindenhurst, New York, whose mother was killed on September 11, said she felt more relief than joy.

She said: 'It was kind of like, finally the bad guy is gone.' But she added: 'I see both sides.'

Sometimes the campers are forced to abandon their preconceptions. Project Common Bond includes both Israelis and Palestinians, and young people who hail from opposite sides of other conflicts.

Richard John Hill, 18, comes from a unionist family in Northern Ireland, and his uncle was killed by the Irish Republican Army. At Project Common Bond, he met someone from a nationalist family whose mother was killed by the IRA.

He said: 'That was entirely new to me. I can't explain how powerful that was.'

Organisers hope to hold the camp abroad again next year, possibly in Spain. In the meantime, campers use social media to stay in touch throughout the year, and some even travel to visit

one another.

Mijal said she has someone to reach out to whenever she's feeling down. She said: 'It's nice to have friends all over the world who know what I'm talking about.'