

## How AuSM Camps Have Changed Our Son's Life

It is June and school has just let out for the summer and we are breathing a sigh of relief. Another stressful year of school completed. Although summer schedule is less predictable than the school year, it is MUCH less stressful for our family.

As we are enjoying a peaceful Saturday evening and I am in the kitchen preparing dinner, my son, Tyler, now 9-years-old, walks in and announces that he wants to go to summer camp. Initially I am shocked! Then almost instantaneously I am petrified! My response to him is surprisingly calm and I tell him that I believe that it is too late to go to camp this summer but I will look at camps and do my best to find him one. To my surprise his response is a calm thank you. Now what do I do?!

Being the person that I am I dive right in and start googling everything I can think of to find out about camps in Minnesota. I find it to be a daunting task in which my anxiety only grows. How will I ever find a camp in which Tyler will be included, safe and have a positive experience? Then the lightbulb goes on and I think, what about the Autism Society of Minnesota. There has to be something there. I look and, to my delight and fear I find several options.

Months go by and another school year begins. Life is back to stress, chaos, academic and social disasters. I think: how on earth can he be successful at camp? We press on.

January comes and now it is time to register for camp. I prepare the application, submit it and actually pray he does not get chosen. Okay so part of me wants him to go because he wants to and the other part wants to protect my child from EVERYTHING. At that time it was a lottery system so there was no guarantee he would be chosen. Low and behold, he was chosen. He was thrilled and I was again petrified.

Fast forward to July and now it is time to drive four hours up north and drop him off for his camp experience. The staff is wonderful, welcoming and truly excited for these kids to be there! I drop him off and leave for what feels like the longest week of my life. When I return to pick him up he is tired and grinning from ear to ear! What a wonderful sight he was.

He has been back to camp every summer since!

Tyler is now 19 years old. He has successfully graduated from high school and is a wonderful, giving and compassionate young man with autism. There are many things in his life that have played a major role in the person he has become today and Camp Discovery is most definitely one of them.

Camp Discovery has helped Tyler learn independence, responsibility, compassion, that trying new things is okay, and how much fun making new friends and hanging out with them can be. Tyler has always been a picky eater, no surprise and similar to a lot of kids with autism. In the beginning, we would prepare and send all his meals for the week. If we didn't he would not eat. Now he does not take his food; he eats what is at camp.

Sometimes it is difficult to impress upon these kids the necessity for hygiene. Camp has most definitely helped Tyler learn the importance of this. At camp he made countless new friendships. One year his good friend had a very difficult time and he was instrumental in helping him calm and be able to remain at camp successfully for the entire week.

All in all Camp Discovery has been a priceless adventure for our son. We are eternally grateful for all those who have made and continue to make camps for those with autism a place for success.

Lynn and Tom Olson