

## A Week to Reconnect

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At Camp To Belong, siblings separated by foster care get to be family again

### A Week to Reconnect



Brothers Deron and Kalob bond in June.

[Photo by James Aronovsky]

Unlike many boys their age, brothers Kalob D., 11, and Deron D., 12, rarely hit, shove, or even yell at each other during their stay at Camp To Belong Nevada, a nonprofit summer camp that reunites siblings in foster care. At this beautiful site in the San Bernardino Mountains, they're too busy

enjoying being a family again with sisters Belauna, 8, and Autumn, 10, and their half-sister, Fayth, 19. For this one week a year, the five siblings can be found heading off to go swimming or horseback riding, often holding hands in one unbroken chain.

Lynn Price, 55, started Camp To Belong 16 summers ago with families like them—and her own—in mind. Once a foster kid herself, Price was 8 when she and her sister, Andi, 9, were reunited for the first time since infancy. "You're not my sister," Lynn told her. But Andi persevered, and today the two are best friends.

"The time you spend in foster care is a small part of your life compared to the rest of it," Price tells the 78 boys and girls around the first-night campfire. "Your relationship with your siblings is the longest-lasting one you'll ever have."

Among the over 600,000 kids in foster care in the U.S., 70% are separated from at least one sibling. Camp To Belong's aim is to create the kind of memories for foster siblings that those in intact families take for granted. Around 3500 children have attended the camps—currently in eight locations from Maine to Washington—and Price believes their week-long experiences start ripples that keep spreading.

Take former campers Jessica C., 19, and her brother, Allen, 23, who are now both counselors. As children, the two were placed in the same home, but one day when Jessica was at school, Allen was moved out. "My brother was ripped from me," she says. "First my parents were gone, and then my brother." Camp To Belong was their lifeline to each other.

The camps are staffed almost entirely by volunteers. Fifteen years ago, counselor Patrick Harden, a youth pastor from Long Beach, Calif., was a social worker when his boss sent him to the camp to help. With a caseload of 85 children, Harden viewed himself as an administrator of the law—he never really thought about his clients' relationships with their siblings. But at camp, he saw how the kids perceived social workers. In a rush. Rarely listening. Cold.

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After he got home, he and his wife adopted a brother-sister pair of foster kids. Since then, Harden has volunteered at over 20 sessions of Camp To Belong.

When the Nevada foster kids first arrived at the camp on Sunday, 14-year-old Danny E. stood apart from his five younger siblings, glowering. "They hate me," he said. Once their protector, Danny had been separated from them when he argued with their foster parent.

But as the week went on, Danny's anger faded. Most of the activities, like karaoke and trust games, were conceived to bring siblings together. On Wednesday night, the campers enjoyed a group birthday party where they all exchanged gifts, selected from donations, with their family members. Danny unwrapped a present from his brother Clifford, 8, who waited for a response. It was a boom box, and Danny smiled. Clifford grinned back. They were brothers again.

Then, on Thursday, the children began getting ready to face their lives without each other. Faces tightened. Squabbles broke out. On Friday, as they boarded the buses, many were crying. "Kids come not wanting to be here, not wanting to be with each other," Allen C. said, "and they leave loving each other, not wanting to go home."

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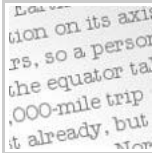
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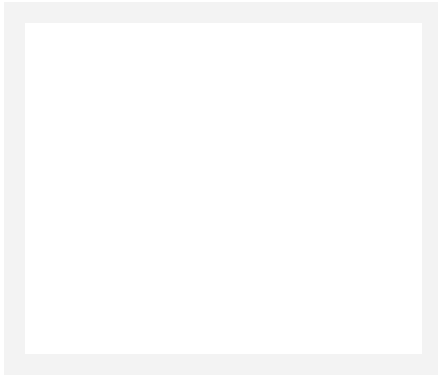


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### Camp To Belong

Can not imagine what that would be like to be separated from my siblings at a young age. What a wonderful way to reunite them, even for a short time. Do they have a web site? Louise Quinn

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