

Camping those cares away

At North Carolina camp, kids with illnesses check 'patient' title at the cabin door



EMILIA PASTINA

epastina@hargray.com
843-304-3229

Nestled in the hardwood forests of the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina is a 72-acre camp that has become a fantasy playground for 4,500 kids and a dream come true for their families.

Victory Junction Gang Camp is like a regular camp, complete with horseback riding, water games, miniature golf and tons of outdoor fun. But this camp, located between Charlotte and Raleigh in Randleman, N.C., goes way beyond singing songs around a campfire and kayaking downstream.

"We want to enrich the lives of chronically ill or seriously ill children and provide them with a life-changing experience," said Ryan Shell, the camp's media and marketing manager.

Victory Junction Gang Camp was founded by Kyle and Pattie Petty in honor of their son Adam, a fourth-generation NASCAR driver who died in a racing accident in 2000. Two years before their son's death, the Petty family visited a similar camp founded by actor Paul Newman near Orlando, Fla., called Boggy Creek Gang Camp. Victory Junction Gang Camp opened in June 2004 on land donated by Richard and Lynda Petty. The camp is a member of the Association of Hole in the Wall Camps.

It's an experience for kids ages 7 to 15 who deal with health issues every day. Kids who take part in the camp have arthritis, asthma, cancer, epilepsy, immunology deficiencies/HIV, sickle cell disease, spina bifida, heart disease, diabetes, autism, cystic fibrosis or a number of other medical conditions.

But when they're at Victory Junc-



ABOVE: A fun tattoo makes a camper smile at Victory Junction Gang Camp in North Carolina. **TOP:** Campers look more like Smurfs after the "Silly Olympics," a food fight like no other.

Photos special to the Packet

tion they're just kids — not patients. They fish, learn archery, create arts and crafts, ride horses, play in an interactive race shop, explore nature, make pottery, take photographs and sing. And because each camp session is medical-issue specific, the young campers make friends who truly understand what they're going through. They compare scars, discuss treatments they've tried and bond.

"The camp changes their lives," Shell said. "They come to camp shy and timid. But when they leave, they have new friends and new confidence."

And even though the purpose of Victory Junction Gang Camp isn't to bring attention to the children's

WANT TO HELP?

Victory Junction Gang Camp relies on donations, and volunteers always are needed.

Is sewing, knitting or crocheting your talent?

Victory Junction Gang Camp needs handmade stuffed bears, quilts and afghans. Each camper's bed is covered with a handmade quilt, and each take home an afghan and a teddy bear.

The camp will provide instructions for the bears, quilts and afghans. Patterns may be downloaded from the camp Web site.



A proud young angler shows off his big catch from the camp's Catch Kiss and Release Marina.

For more information, go to www.victoryjunction.org and click on the "how you can help" link, or call 336-498-9055.

Please see **CAMPING** on 4C

C

CAMPING

Continued from 1C

medical conditions, the camp is a full-service medical facility with a staff that is able to provide just about anything from dialysis to chemotherapy.

But you won't find hospital beds or doctors wearing white coats in the medical center. This medical facility — called Goody's Body Shop — has a relaxed, camp-like atmosphere.

Most of the campers are from North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, but 15 percent come from elsewhere in the country. Summer sessions are weeklong and disease specific, and each session has up to 125 kids. The campers' families are invited to share the experience during the fall and spring, when around 32 families visit on the weekends.

It's probably no surprise that the camp has an obvious racing theme. First, there's the body shop. The dining hall is known as the Hendrick Motorsports Fuel Stop. And the water park is referred to as the Kyle Petty Charity Ride Across America.

It might be a surprise to know that the camp costs the young campers' families nothing. The camp's \$6 million yearly operating budget, including the \$2,500 cost for every camper, comes from donations made by corporations, organizations and individuals. Knowing that caring for a child with chronic or

CAMPER IN MIND?

Victory Junction Gang campers must be between the ages of 7 and 15 and must have a medical diagnosis that fits one of the Victory Junction Gang Camp sessions.

The 2007 summer sessions begin June 3 and end August 24. One-week sessions are being organized for kids with a variety of diagnoses, from arthritis to cancer.

For more information about who qualifies, how to apply, specific summer sessions and sessions throughout the year, go to www.victoryjunction.org or call 336-498-9055.

serious medical issues is not only emotionally hard but also financially taxing, Victory Junction Gang Camp takes that away for one week.

"Take that money and go to the beach or go on a date," Shell said they love to tell parents.

And in addition to the weeklong summer sessions for the campers, entire families can take part in the experience during three-day retreats in the fall and spring. Each weekend, up to 32 families participate in the themed retreats.

"There's nothing else like it," Shell said of Victory Junction. "You sit and watch and see so much joy."