

By DAVID CRARY
Associated Press

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ROCK HILL, N.Y. — When Matt Hobbs first showed up at Camp Our Time a year ago, he barely spoke. Even surrounded by other young stutterers, maybe it didn't make sense for a teen with as severe an impediment as his to attend a camp focused on the performing arts.

But Hobbs licked his stage fright and came back this year enthusiastic, gregarious and bold.

Though it took him a few long pauses, punctuated by deep, determined gasps of breath, he couldn't have been clearer about his feelings toward the camp.

“On stage, at first ... I was scared as can be. I was just terrified,” he said. “I'm not now. It just feels awesome.”

Hobbs, 17, was among 40 campers who completed Our Time's seven-day session this month. They ranged in age from 8 to 19, boys and girls, racially and socially diverse, with two common bonds: an unshakable stuttering problem and the courage to go on stage anyway.

Most, like Hobbs, are the only stutterers at their schools — vulnerable to teasing, isolation, impatience and condescension. At the lakeside camp in the Catskill Mountains, where even the magnetic founder/director is a stutterer, acceptance is the watchword as the campers plunged daily into workshops and rehearsals for the self-written songs, rap routines and skits they'd perform at a gala week-ending show.

“I wanted to create a place where kids from all over the country and even the world can come, and know that they're wonderful just the way they are,” said Taro Alexander, the professional actor who started the camp last year. “Just because they stutter doesn't mean it has to stop them from doing anything in life.”

Hobbs, from Richmond, Va., was among the pioneering campers last year and rarely spoke as the week progressed. At the end-of-camp show, when he broke down in tears and was unable to finish reading a poem he'd written, other campers spontaneously enveloped him with supportive hugs.

This year, he was delighted to return, even leading Our Time's boisterous cheer as the bus left New York City for the 90-mile trip to the camp.

“Where I'm from, I don't know any kids who stutter,” said Hobbs, who cheerfully volunteered to be interviewed by a visiting reporter and video crew. “Here, there are so many people who do, it's just amazing. You can really have fun.”



Mary Altaffer / AP
Linnea Schurig, 13, of San Rafael, Calif., laughs while having lunch with other campers at Camp Our Time. Stuttering hasn't dimmed her interest in public speaking.

There are other camps for stutterers scattered around the U.S., but Our Time is distinctive in its strong emphasis on the performing arts and the absence of any speech therapy.

The campers who sing or act often find their stuttering eases, or even disappears, when they perform — but they're treated like stars regardless. When Alexander, on a shaded porch, watched previews of his campers' performances, his only exhortation was to project more loudly to ensure that the audience at the final show could hear every word.

"Once they taste success, it's something they never forget," Alexander said.

Among the standout performers this year were two Long Islanders — Danielle Diesu, 18, of Huntington, N.Y., and Ashlee Walsh, 17, of East Meadow, N.Y., who wrote and sang a stirring song about the friendships made at camp. Diesu plans to major in music after she starts college this fall; Walsh, a high school senior-to-be, wants to be a speech pathologist.

"Both of us have a really bad past — more hard times than happy," said Diesu, who has stuttered ever since she could speak. "Being a teenager is hard enough, and being a stutterer is even harder... Some kids would hear me start to stutter and just walk away."

Walsh said middle school was particularly tough for her — including the trauma of being kicked out of a 6th grade class by a teacher who thought she was being disrespectful for stuttering while giving an oral report.

Camp is different, said Walsh. "Everyone here — they always have your back."

Another poised performer was Linnea Schurig, 13, of San Rafael, Calif., whose stuttering — and the teasing it sometimes induces — hasn't dimmed her interest in public speaking. She seized the chance to give an 8th grade graduation speech.

"It was scary. It was exciting," she said. "It's hard, because it's not quite smooth. But I like talking, so why shouldn't I be able to?"

Like other campers, she's tried speech therapy at school, with little result.

"I'm the only student in the entire county who stutters," she said. "They group me together with kids who lisp or can't say their R's"

There is no prescribed cure for the stutterers, including an estimated 3 million of them in the United States. There are a variety of treatments that can prove helpful; experts encourage consultations with a speech pathologist to determine the best options.

Alexander's camp serves as a respite from the therapy regimens that many campers are following.

"I thought there should be something else out there, something that exists for kids to come and just feel good about themselves," Alexander said. "I believe that the first step to feeling good about yourself is to accept who you are, exactly the way you are."

The camp grew out of the Our Time Theatre Company, a once-a-week, academic-year performing arts program for stuttering teens from the New York City area that Alexander started in 2001. Its participants have taken some productions on tour and written songs that Carly Simon, herself a stutterer, and other pop stars sang on a newly released CD.

Alexander, 37, grew up in Washington, D.C., the son of a theater company director, and his current work is driven by his own childhood experiences.

“I grew up feeling very, very ashamed of the way that I spoke,” he said. “I didn’t meet anyone else who stutters until I was 26 years old, so for a very long time I thought that I was the only one in the world who spoke the way that I did.

“I would often not raise my hand in class — I was so afraid to get teased or picked on, and often I did, that I often didn’t say what I wanted to say.”

He found an escape in acting — able to say his lines smoothly — and began to think of ways to help kids facing the same traumas he had faced. He’d like to expand the camp from one week to a full-summer operation, drawing hundreds of campers from all over the world.

“It takes a lot of courage when you stutter to speak — raising your hand in class and saying your name, ordering what you want at a restaurant, asking someone out,” Alexander said.

“Imagine going through your life just not talking. You finally get to a place where people tell you that you can talk whenever you want, and if it takes a long time for the words to come out, it’s OK.”

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