

George (not his real name) was a scholarship camper several years ago, for several summers. He was very overweight, and a non-swimmer, but willing to try. Gordon Grant – also a former Mondamin camper and staff member, now a school principal for an alternative school in Asheville, and on our scholarship board – was his sponsor.

Frank,

I came down to camp yesterday to drop off some meds for George and check in on him. I arrived right at the end of rest hour and left a little after four. We went down to the canoe docks, got a canoe and went out and practiced sweeps and crossbows, then came back and took a short swimming lesson with Mark. Simple. Nothing unusual, except it's extraordinary what is happening for that young man and his family because of the camp experience, and I wanted to write to thank you for giving him the opportunity.

When I arrived at camp yesterday, it was a pretty slow afternoon. Most of the big trips were out of camp. Not the glamour part of camp – nothing exciting going on. Yet, if one believes in Chief's statement that adventure is activity on personal frontiers – and I believe that on a molecular level as one of the guiding statements of my life – there was plenty going on, and it was amazing.

George's parents are astonished at the transformation that has been wrought over the summer, and it is having no small effect on them as well. They see the positive changes in his physique and self-confidence and they are applying those same changes at home so that he will build on them when he returns. Literally: they will probably change where they live, they are changing their dietary and exercise habits, and they are incredibly proud of the positive reports he has received. They check the camp website for photos of him every day. His mom was very unsure that he would even make it through camp, yet he has changed dietary habits, lost weight, gone on hiking trips, tried riding, climbing, and a number of other activities and been a willing participant in sampling things that are way, way out of his comfort zone. Most importantly, he has overcome the fear of swimming. When he and I went down to swim, he flung himself off the dock and vanished into the water. He stayed down for a few seconds, rising slowly. I looked over to see if Mark was concerned with the disappearance and he just smiled and said:

"He sure couldn't do that at the start of camp."

When George and I swam around – and believe me, he is still a struggling and awkward swimmer – I marveled at what courage it must have taken to get into the water when he wasn't at all sure the first time he did it if he would rise to the surface. THAT's cutting loose! That's extreme adventure! That is identical to the feeling of commitment, the fear an athlete feels confronted by a big rapid like Gorilla, or running it out on a thin section of 5.11 face climbing. There is no qualitative difference. You could even argue that it's more of a leap into the unknown for a beginner, because in those other situations one at least has some skill sets in place and are making some rational judgments about whether those skill sets are ready for the challenge. But George has risen to the surface: he's gaining confidence, and he's drownproofed – **he can do something no one else in his family can do**: stay in the water and afloat and treading it for twenty or more minutes, a skill that may indeed save his life some day. To watch him awkwardly and gamely try to improve on that, to learn the crawl and the elementary back

stroke (which might take him another summer or two to accomplish at this rate) – that was very moving and inspiring, and I climbed out of the water as impressed with the accomplishment as with any athletic event that I have seen.

Moving a camper from being a non swimmer to being drownproofed in a summer is a much bigger accomplishment than just polishing up a set of skills that move a camper from the Nantahala to the Ocoee: the first accomplishment completely changes a life, the second is an enhancement.

Camp gave George much more than the swimming skills – he’s got a confidence to try new things that was not there before. The great educational experiment that is camp continues to work its miracles in ways that its counselors may not even realize.

Best,
Gordon