

# Approaching 'normal' at Camp Sunshine

## Camp strives to give kids 'best week of their lives'



Rayshon Roundfield soars over a lake.



From left, Camp Sunshine cabin mates Hillary Coffman of Loganville, Courtney Wilson of Lithonia and Brittany Lockwood of Dalton get acquainted on the second day of teen camp.



By Gale Horton Gay  
Photos by Gale Horton Gay

A few weeks ago, **Rayshon Roundfield** was pretty much confined to a wheelchair, spending just 12 minutes a day on a treadmill to strengthen his legs. On this Monday—his second day at camp—the 17-year-old is flying overhead on a zip line. “Hey Rayshon, that was awesome,” calls someone from the ground.

He’s beaming. And he’s sweating. Unable to climb several flights of stairs that lead to the launch platform, the teen relied on his upper body strength to hoist himself up 40 feet using a pulley and rope while strapped into a sling and harness. It took a while with several rest stops, plenty of shouts of encouragement from campers and counselors on the ground and a burst of cheering when he reached the top. Then after being properly secured, Roundfield sailed through the clearing some 600 feet, slowing as he went about midway across a lake and then reversed direction. He was grabbed by a small group of staffers once over land.

“I felt like I was flying,” said the teen as he was being unclipped from the apparatus. Roundfield is just one of some 400 young people attending Camp Sunshine this summer. He was there last week with 180 other teens.

This week some 225 7- through 12-year-olds are at the Twin Lakes Camp property in Rutledge, Ga.

Twin Lakes Camp, located 50 miles from Decatur, is the 500-acre camp home to some 20-plus organizations that serve children with serious illnesses and life challenges.

This is where Decatur-based Camp Sunshine operates its summer camps for children with cancer. Their cancers include bone cancer, brain tumors, leukemia and Ewings Sarcoma. The campers come from around the state—some from as far as Savannah. And fundraisers and grants such as a recent \$10,000 award from MassMutual help keep the camp free for families and support other youth programs hosted by Camp Sunshine throughout the year.

Here they swim, hike, make crafts, write and perform songs, fish, ride horses, make new friends and do archery. In addition to the counselors who will laugh with them, guide them and keep typical teenage issues from mushrooming into major problems, these campers are monitored by approximately 115 volunteers, eight nurses and a doctor. Some of the children may take a break during their day to receive chemo treatments.

**Brinsley Thigpen**, camp director, said the goal is to create an environment in which the children “finally feel normal again,” where



## Camp

Continued From Page 1B

having cancer is not a big deal nor is being bald, missing a limb or being in a wheelchair. Children get to leave behind hovering parents and teachers, friends and medical specialists who see them as cancer patients.

“My personal goal is to make it the best week of their lives no matter how long their life is,” said Thigpen. “If they live to be 8, if they live to be 99, I want them to remember that week at camp.”

These two weeks are something of a family reunion time for Thigpen and her family. Her parents, **Mo** and **Jane Thrash** of Decatur, along with her sister **Mary Katherine White** are with her at camp pitching in. This summer White is serving as a cabin counselor for the 12th time (this is her 17th summer at the camp).

“I love it,” said White, a preschool teacher, citing the “fun, joy and excitement” that takes place.

The family’s involvement in Camp Sunshine grew out of a painful personal experience in their lives—the death of the Thrash’s 3-year-old son from leukemia in 1978. **Sally Hale**, who founded Camp Sunshine and still serves as its executive director, had been **Callaway Thrash’s** nurse. The parents began volunteering with the camp and took their daughters along.

Thigpen recalls spending summers at the camp and loving every minute of it. She’s 32 and said this is her 27th year at camp.

Now she helps kids like **Kareem Gibbs**, 13, of Tucker and **Leo Lucier**, 18, of Atlanta to develop their own special memories.

**Dexter Wilbon**, 18, spent his sixth year at Camp Sunshine this year.

“I think Camp Sunshine is amazing,” said Wilbon. “It is the most enriching experience you can have. All the friendship, everybody is understanding what you are going through. It is the most welcoming and fun experience. You get a year’s worth of memories in a week.”

And volunteers are equally enthusiastic.

“This is the greatest week of the year,” said **Kathryn Graves**. “This is my absolute favorite week of the year. It renews your spirit to be here.”



A giant Hulk figure greets campers at Camp Twin Lakes. Super heroes is this year’s Camp Sunshine theme.



Camp Twin Lakes staffer Sophie Edward strums the guitar while campers record lyrics to a song they wrote on their second day of camp.



Camp Director Brinsley Thigpen, left, with volunteer Mary Katherine White.



Dexter Wilbon, left, and Leo Lucier record lyrics they collaborated on at Camp Sunshine.