



TOUGH AS NAILS

A father's story of resilience

Written By: Justin Plunkett

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Many of our volunteer counselors were once campers, and Justin is one of those volunteers. His story is truly a journey of pain, love, hope and healing, parenting his girls through his own grief and honoring his wife every moment he can. Thank you, Justin, for your willingness to share your story with the world.

On March 12th, 2024 my family lost the toughest person any of us knew. My beautiful wife Toni passed away at 49 years young after a 5-year battle with metastatic breast cancer. Toni had been preparing us for life without her, but none of us saw it until she was gone. Toni was "Tough As Nails" and taught me how to raise our two daughters, Emma (11) and Ella (9) without missing a beat. We kept our routines going and living the way we had because Toni would want us to. No matter how prepared we were for continuing in life, we had zero idea of the amount of pain and grief that would follow.

We learned about Camp HOPE through the girls' school counselor, and we attended the spring camp just two months after Toni passed. Honestly, I did not want to go as things like this are not for me and my

girls are kind of shy, so I did not think they would enjoy this either. We reluctantly arrived at Camp Saturday morning. We were scared, shy, nervous, and sad. By lunch, all those feelings had left, other than sadness. I saw my daughters smiling, laughing, and playing with kids they had just met. I was amazed watching the counselors interact with the kids. They were so caring and accommodating to every camper. We were all there for a sad reason and yet all smiling within three hours of arrival. I think the cookies had something to do with it.

I also met some great people in the adult camp and heard their stories of why they were present. I came to Camp with the thought that my story was the saddest, the worst, no doubt the most heartbreaking tale of losing a loved one. I was immediately heartbroken for everyone else in the room and realized that all of our stories are the saddest possible. None worse than the next, none easier. We all grieve differently and there is no right or wrong way to do it. We were all brought to Camp due to the worst thing imaginable, losing a loved one, but you quickly realize that you are not alone.

In a very short time, I felt relaxed, and comfortable sharing with this group of strangers. And yet, we all hated that we were meeting because we lost a loved one. I left spring camp feeling better than I could have imagined and had a completely different outlook on our loss. Though still unbearably sad, I had a different mindset, new tricks others taught me, and I knew I could address some difficult thoughts. We also already knew we were going to attend the reunion camp because of how enjoyable our weekend was.

Between the spring camp and reunion camp, we had good days and bad days. I went through multiple career changes and the girls were still figuring out life without Mom. We talked about Camp HOPE often and remembered our experiences. We were excited to go back for many reasons, mostly the cookies, and yet I still hate that we know of this camp because we lost Toni. Going to the reunion camp was completely different. We were excited and were met with hugs from those we have not seen in nine months. Camp was happier this time

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Tough As Nails

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around. Still a ton of tears were shed as we shared our stories with new campers and we heard theirs. The excitement my girls had seeing their past counselors was amazing. On the last day of Camp during the closing ceremony, my daughter Ella curled up on the lap of her counselor and they just hugged each other during the songs. That shows the bonds that are formed in just 30 hours of Camp. We are all here for a terrible reason, but we must keep going as we have no other choice. We try to ease others sadness, even if only for a while.

I am honored to say that I have been accepted as a counselor at Camp HOPE. I am going to do all I can to make future campers have the best weekend possible, just like we did. We are together due to a loss but there is no reason we cannot put that aside and have a little fun. I am excited at the thought of my daughters joining me as counselors once they are old enough. For us to be together again at Camp will be a beautiful thing and another way we can keep Toni's memory alive.

We are Camp HOPE!

The Plunkett's – Justin, Emma and Ella.



MY MOM

An Interview with Emma

Emma is Justin's 11 year old daughter. She is loving, compassionate and smart as a whip and she was willing to share a small glimpse into her own story. Emma, thank you for being brave.

Emma, can you share why you came to camp?

A: For my mom.

Would you tell me a little bit about her?

A: She loved all things Disney. We went as a family four times to Disneyland and Mom loved it. She was the best at making Halloween Disney villain costumes.

Can you talk about your experience at Camp HOPE? What would you tell another kid like you, who might be afraid to attend?

A: I was scared to come to Camp because I didn't know what it was, and I had never slept in a room with strangers before, but it's fun and people care about you. They know what you feel. No one will tell anyone what you said, and it is a safe place. A couple of my favorite memories are when one of my counselors sewed a patch on my sweatshirt, my group's walk to the lighthouse, and seeing a baby turtle. After Camp, I was sad to leave but felt better after talking about Mom.



"DOGS HAVE A WAY OF FINDING THE PEOPLE WHO NEED THEM, FILLING AN EMPTINESS WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WE HAVE."

- THOM JONES

CONTROL IS AN ILLUSION

Healing ourselves as we help others.

Written By: Sandy Wolf

This quote from Thom Jones is exactly why we make sure to include therapy dogs throughout the weekend. They do everything from welcoming in sad and often nervous families on Saturday morning, to sitting alongside teens during our candlelight ceremony, to snuggling in with a group of kids during our medical question and answer session. We are so thankful for Sandy and Maggie (and all of our therapy dog teams) for the healing work that they do.

Greetings! I'm Sandy Wolf, a recently retired senior... and also a daughter, sister, wife, aunt, mom, grandmother, pet mom, friend, nurse, and - now - a Camp HOPE volunteer with Maggie my therapy dog.

I have experienced multiple losses over the years. All have changed me. Each has taught me about love and healing. Some of these losses have

been expected – a 'good death' after a long life and a bad disease, still sad and hard, but with a gift of peacefulness. Others have left me shaken and lonely for someone I cared for and cared about, people and pets I will forever miss being with me in this world. A few of the losses I've experienced have been tragedies that have rocked me to my very depths, leaving me wondering how I will ever be OK again. Ever.

GRIEF IS MESSY AND IT CAN BE VERY COMPLICATED. HERE'S A BIT OF MY STORY...

As a young married woman, I 'planned' to have two boys, two years apart. Tim was born four days after Big Brother Matt's second birthday. Everything was on schedule. I'd not yet learned that control is an illusion. Tim had medical problems as an infant and died suddenly and unexpectedly at age seven months. I was devastated. I didn't know anyone else whose baby had died. I did not think I would live through this. With faith, family/friends, and hard, hard work, I did. I was changed forever.

I became a nurse, specializing in babies and moms who died. I helped initiate an innovative parent support group. I taught doctors and staff and anyone who would listen how to help us - or at least not hurt us. I found purpose and it was energizing and healing. Who knew?!

During my nurse work and bereavement learning/teaching (which turned into a career), I became aware of Camp HOPE founded by Becky Loy. Awesome concept ... exciting! I shared the information with families whose children were grieving. I needed to know though, that it was 'legit', authentic, competent care. Trust can come slowly when you've lived

through hurt. So, I volunteered several times and found Camp was everything promised and more.

It was fun, safe, real, and refreshing. The sharing that occurred opened our hearts to let the love and life back in. Yes, our hearts- kids and counselors alike. Camp HOPE was, and still is, life-changing. Those are my best words for it. The freedom to laugh and cry and break-dance (yup) and eat snacks and do crafts or write a story and make new friends all adds up to magic. It is the power of people who are seeking and finding their joy again. And sharing it-tentatively, awkwardly, whole-heartedly, with trust and caring. Life-changing indeed.

Eleven years ago my grandson Brandon, age 26, died from an opioid drug overdose. It was another complicated, devastating, soul-numbing loss. Again, I learned so much about loving, hurting, and healing. I learned about the strength we have to survive the things we do not think we can.

Fast forward 40+ years. It is my time now to find a purpose that can hold a candle to an incredible life spent in nursing and



grief work with family, friends, patients, and staff. Tall order? Turns out ...not so much.

Those life lessons of humility, compassion, and caring - *Thank you baby Tim, charming Brandon, and so many others* - have led me and three-year-old Maggie back to Camp HOPE. It's a different and inspiring role for me. I have the privilege of watching sweet, sweet, very hairy Maggie snuggle and comfort and entertain (she likes to steal Kleenex). What a gift I have received to be able to work with the people 'I get' and who 'get me' and to offer the pure presence of puppy love.

YOU'VE GIVEN ME MY LITTLE GIRL BACK Camp HOPE Board Member Highlight: Brett Penager

Our Board of Directors for Camp HOPE is filled to the brim with people who are both experts in their field and have a deep love for Camp. Brett is no exception. He has an abundance of experience growing, not only his own business, but supporting the growth of multiple nonprofits. We're very lucky to have all of his knowledge and support.

Currently, I'm a founding partner of Chiro One Wellness Centers which is the largest privately held chiropractic organization in the world. In addition, I serve as a Board Member for [Logan's Heart and Smiles](#), [Beat the Streets Chicago](#), and [Camp HOPE](#). As a Board Member, my intention is to support our fundraising efforts so we can hold Camp HOPE in perpetuity through

raising an endowment large enough to fund it annually. I'm excited for the future of Camp HOPE under Maria Loy Carson's leadership as she stewards us into the future in expanding our reach nationally. Having known her personally since 1990, and witnessing what skills, experience, and leadership she brings; Camp HOPE is in great hands.

My first experience with Camp HOPE was in the fall of 1991. I had moved to Stevens Point, WI as the Head Assistant Wrestling Coach to work with Marty Loy and learned about Camp HOPE through him and his wife Becky. Personally, I've always looked for ways in which I could contribute to benefit humanity as so many had poured into me. When Marty told me the story of the loss of his daughter Sara and starting Camp HOPE as a result, I was immediately drawn to support it. Starting as a counselor, I was blown away at the impact the weekend had for both me and all the participants. Having not lost anyone close to me at that point in time, my experience

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MY LIFE WOULD FOREVER BE DIFFERENT

The story of remembering a childhood Camp HOPE experience

Written By: Christa Oskey

You know when you see, hear or smell something that triggers memories to come flooding back? It could be a song, a particular type of bird, or the smell of a tobacco pipe (yes, this one is my own and brings back a memory of my grandpa sitting at the kitchen table eating his peanut butter and jelly toast for breakfast). Christa's memories flooded back after she saw a flyer about Camp HOPE. Thank you, Christa for being a beautiful reminder of why we do what we do.

My name is Christa Oskey. I felt I needed to reach out, as I noticed a flyer for Camp HOPE being advertised at Innovative Growth in Appleton.

The reason I'm reaching out is because Camp HOPE holds a very dear place in my heart. When I was 5 years old, my beautiful Mom, Sally Jensen passed away from Breast Cancer. The year was 1991, and she was only 41 years old. My siblings and I are all four years apart, with me being the youngest. At the time, I didn't quite understand that my Mom was never coming back and my life would forever be different. As time went on, I realized I was going to miss all of the things young girls, teenagers and adult women enjoy doing with their Mom.

Shortly after my Mom's passing, Dad had my siblings and I start counseling. I believe it was our counselor who mentioned going to Camp HOPE. I'm now 38 years old, and still have vivid memories from Camp. I can picture

it in my mind. I remember so many activities we did outside, where we would eat our meals, the fire pit area we all thought was so cool, and the candle light vigil. I remember receiving this pillow/backpack at Camp that had a face and his name was Trusty. He had little hidden pockets where we could write how we were feeling and put our notes in there to keep between myself and Trusty.

I guess I just wanted to reach out and say thank you! Thank you so much for having a place like this for kids to go after losing a loved one. It was nice to have other kids around knowing exactly what I was going through. My siblings and I didn't have any friends that understood the pain we were feeling. We were embarrassed to cry in front of them. At Camp HOPE, we were welcomed with open arms from everyone there. We were able to share stories, cry and not feel embarrassed. We knew we were not alone.

I sent a picture of the flyer to my siblings,



This is a picture of me and my Mom. This was taken in the Bahamas. My family stayed there for the whole summer while my Dad tried every last effort to help Mom. There was a group of Cancer patients who went for a trial a doctor was doing.

and we were all reminiscing the memories we made there. Thirty three years later, and we are still talking about it. Camp HOPE has definitely made an impact. Thanks so much for being there for us and for so many others during such a difficult time.

Thank you,
Christa Oskey

You've Given Me My Little Girl Back

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of Camp was more joyful than sorrowful as my cabin and the kids I was responsible for had an absolute blast. Even the candlelight ceremony honoring those we'd lost was quickly followed by a lot of hugging, joy, and revival of the fun atmosphere. It wasn't until the next day when the parents came to pick up their kids, that I understood the depth of what a transformational weekend it had been for all that attended.

I remember fondly, prior to wrapping up with a sing along before dismissing the kids to go home, Red (the Loy's golden retriever) was running around with a ton of

yarn puffballs, or warm fuzzies as they were called, around his neck. While speaking to one of my campers' mothers, she broke down crying and thanked me profusely while her daughter was chasing Red around laughing uncontrollably and playing. When I asked why she was thanking me, she said, "you've given me my little girl back. I've not seen any life or joy in her eyes after she lost her father and siblings in a car accident in which we were the only two survivors. She completely shut down and no doctors, therapist, or I could get through to her. This is the first time I've seen her have joy and

laughter again. Camp HOPE is what brought her back...so thank you."

After then crying myself, I got it loud and clear. Now, 33 years later, it's been beyond an honor to serve as a Camp counselor, contributor, and Board Member in supporting kids and families that have experienced tragedy so they can both honor those whom they've lost and resume living powerfully into the future because of their experience at Camp HOPE.



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THE ONE WHO PLANTED THE TREE."**

-VIETNAMESE PROVERB

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to all of our anonymous donors.*

We believe that no child should be unable to experience the healing power of Camp HOPE because of their financial background. Our donors are essential part of Camp HOPE operations, support, and healing. Thank you for helping plant the tree.

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Brenda Ledvina
Dax Bakken

Ann Terrill
*Dax Bakken, 1st anniversary of Dax
passing during Ironman race last
year in Madison! So missed by all
his family. Loved forever.*

Bill & Robin James
*Dax Bakken, Thank you for being
there for Maeve & Kristin*

Kristine Simon
Dax Bakken

Catherine Buotte
*Dax Bakken - and in support of the
help Camp gave to Kristin Keir and
Maeve Keir Bakken*

Jan Johnson
Dax Bakken

Kristy Roherty
*Dax Bakken, In memory of the
amazing man that Dax was.*

Kathy Kusnierczyk
In memory of Dax Bakken

Michelle Hoffner
Dax Bakken, We love you.

Sally McGaw
*Dax Bakken,
Remembering Dax*

A YEAR HAS PASSED A letter to a husband and to a community.

Written By: Kristin Kier. Spring 2024 Adult Camper

You may have noticed all of the beautiful donations in memory of Dax. All of these donations started with an email from his wife, Kristin. Kristin and her daughter Maeve came to Camp HOPE in May this year and at the year anniversary of his death, Kristin sent out an email to her community with an ask: to help the place that helped her, Camp HOPE.

A year has passed. A year of my life on planet earth without you. How have I done this? And how are you not here? These, the perpetual, unfading questions. You are so alive in my mind's eye, Dax. So lovely, inhaling so fully, your spirit and the essence of you so sentient and vital. So alive. You're here, you're ours, you're where you belong. It's how this slice of me holds you, knows you, understands and feels you. You were meant to be, Dax.

You were absolutely, fervently meant to be.

If I had 60 seconds more, I would say I love you. I love you. I love you. And then I would hold your perfect hands and listen to

your breath and feel your warmth and smell your neck. I would disappear into your quietly spectacular eyes one more time. And I would say I love you, I love you, I love you and I thank you.

Maeve and I had the privilege of attending Camp HOPE this past spring. At no cost. These folks have created and offer this life-changing experience for grieving children and their loved ones ... for free.

We apprehensively arrived feeling almost out of body early on a Saturday, carrying so many of the scary and painfully alien feelings new to us since Dax died.



And we left the next afternoon, deeply affected, changed for the good, and eternally grateful. For Maeve to be with other children who understand the shoes she stands in and for me to watch her be supported from across the camp as I connected with grieving parents and partners in my own profound way was a gift for which I will be forever grateful. There are not words for the magic that happens in the pain there. And, too, for the incredible fun and connection Maeve had and experienced through her grief.

Dax would be so thankful that his ladies found this place and that these people spend their lives doing what they do, creating this healing space. Grief work is so important and this place is beautifully intentional and masterful at offering the opportunity to do it.



Jennifer Brady

Dax Bakken, I am grateful to your camp for offering comfort and respite to my dear friend Kristin and her daughter. I am donating in memory of their wonderful partner/dad.

Jim and Pat Keir

Dax Bakken, We lost Dax during the IronMan in 2023. His partner, Kristin, and their daughter, Maeve, benefitted greatly from their experience at Camp HOPE. We hope our memorial donation will help other families have the same opportunity. Thank you.

Marilyn Allen

Don Amiot

Craig Ewald

Donald Ewald

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Christa Plunkett

Toni Marie Plunkett, In memory & love of my Tough As Nails sister-in-law

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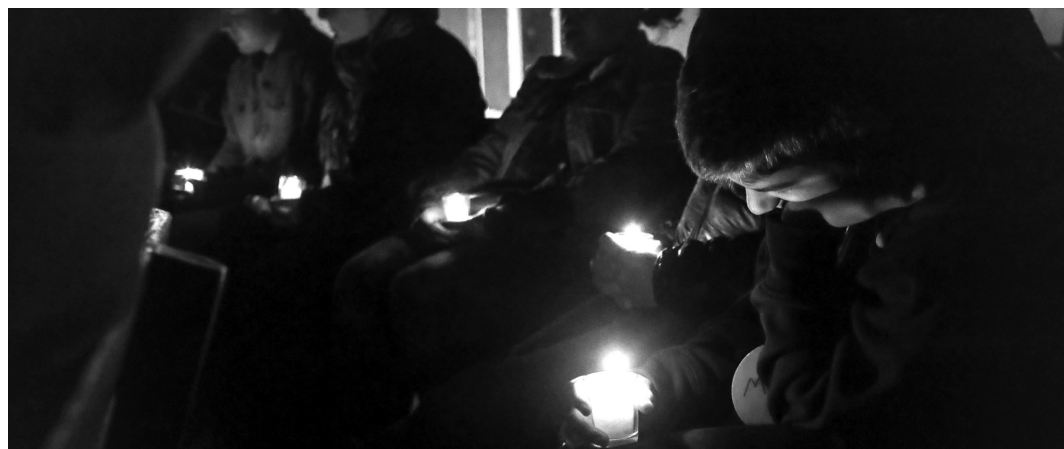
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