

Community Spotlight

November, 2023

Camp Surefire Offers a Unique Experience Designed for Rhode Island Kids With Type 1 Diabetes

Q: What is type 1 diabetes and what makes it particularly challenging for kids who live with this disease?

A: Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease that attacks the part of the pancreas that makes insulin. Insulin is a hormone that helps blood glucose enter the cells in the body for use as energy. Kids with type 1 must give themselves insulin throughout the day either with injections or through an electronic pump. They continuously monitor their blood sugar to make sure that it does not get too high or too low. This can be tricky as things like exercise, other medications, and puberty can all affect how much insulin may be needed.

If you have type 1 diabetes, there are no days off. The disease is manageable, but it requires constant diligence and attention. Kids with type 1 haven't made any lifestyle choices that have led to their diagnosis, they just have developed a broken pancreas. People with type 2 diabetes still make plenty of insulin, but due to a combination of genetic and lifestyle factors, they develop high blood sugars as well. Most people with type 2 diabetes can be managed with medicines other than insulin, while those with type 1 have no choice.

Q: What makes Camp Surefire unique?

A: Camp Surefire provides all the resources needed to ensure a fun and safe overnight camp experience for kids living with type 1 diabetes. We are able to give parents/guardians the peace of mind that their kids are in safe hands with 24/7 medical care. While other camps may have one nurse available onsite, Camp Surefire has more than a dozen medical professionals - including local physicians, pharmacists, nurses, and dietitians - who volunteer and stay onsite for the full camp week.



Dr. Gregory Fox, Medical Director and Ali Fox, Executive Director, Camp Surefire



At left: Alexa Donovan, PharmD, RPh, CDCES, CDOE, Clinical Pharmacist at Lifespan / Rhode Island Hospital Adult Endocrinology Clinic. She and her husband (who is also a pharmacist) take a week of vacation to volunteer at Camp Surefire each summer.

“Throughout the past ten years, Camp Surefire has impacted my life tremendously in so many ways - both professionally and personally. Not only do I feel that my experiences at Camp Surefire helped me land my current position, but Camp Surefire has prepared me and taught me everything I need to know to be able to succeed in my role. I feel that I can closely connect to my patients with type 1 diabetes by providing them with real-life and education scenarios, and by counseling them effectively. I can only hope that the impact I have on the campers is a fraction of the impact they have on me.”

Q: Why does Rhode Island need a place like Camp Surefire?

A: Kids diagnosed with type 1 diabetes often don't know other peers living with the same challenges. They may be the only one at their school who must go to the nurse and give themselves insulin each day at lunch. At camp, everyone in the dining hall checks their blood sugar, counts carbs, and takes insulin. Camp Surefire gives kids with type 1 diabetes an opportunity to develop connections and friendships with others who share the same experiences. They are able to build a support system of others who “get it” and who they can reach out to on the inevitable hard days.

Q: There is obviously a lot involved in running a summer camp for kids. How did you come about being involved with this endeavor and what was your motivation?

A: While Dr. Fox was a fellow at Hasbro Children's Hospital, he volunteered at Camp Surefire and loved it so much that he returned year after year. In 2008, the organization who previously ran the camp dissolved. Dr. Fox kept thinking about the kids who attended camp. There was one little face, in particular, that kept popping up in his mind. He couldn't imagine telling her there was nothing he could do to save the camp. With help from friends and family, Dr. Fox decided to start a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Since then, Camp Surefire has continued to grow and get stronger and stronger each year.

Q: What does a typical day look like at Camp Surefire?

A: Our team plans a huge variety of activities to capture the interests of our campers. The kids participate in traditional camp activities like swimming, playing capture the flag, and doing arts and crafts. We have longtime volunteers who join us to run yoga, Zumba, and karate sessions for our campers. We also host a band one evening and run a carnival (complete with lots of “free snacks” that are type 1

friendly.) We have nightly campfires and sing-alongs. In addition, we also incorporate different diabetes education sessions into camp week. These could be run by Dr. Fox, members of the med staff, our camp dietitians, and/or volunteers coming in from the community.

Q: Can you describe why mealtime is such an important part of camp?

A: Every meal is a learning experience for our campers and our staff. At mealtime, everyone at the table is checking their blood sugar and taking their insulin. For some campers, this is the first time they have ever dosed “in public” and often kids who did not previously give themselves their own injection - are inspired to do so while at camp. Mealtime is an opportunity for kids who are not currently using an insulin pump to see how their friends manage their blood sugars using the technology.

Q: What do campers and parents enjoy most about camp?

A: Campers are so happy to have the chance to be with other kids who are just like them. The sense of community and sense of belonging is extremely strong at Camp Surefire. By the end of the first day, it would be difficult for a new volunteer to know which of the campers are new and who has been coming for years. The older kids and counselors are awesome at making sure everyone feels welcome and included.



Anna, camper, age 11

“When I am at school, people are always asking questions or looking at me because of diabetes. At Camp Surefire, I can just relax, be myself and be with people who understand what it’s like to have type 1 diabetes. It makes me feel like I am not alone. Also, all the people are always so nice. I am always counting down the days until camp starts!”

Parents (although nervous for the first year) are grateful for the respite and chance to have a few nights sleep without having to be the one to get up and check their camper’s blood sugar. It is not uncommon for parents of veteran campers to drop off their camper and head straight to the airport for a quick getaway!

Q: What are the ages of the kids and teens who participate in Camp Surefire?

A: Campers range in age from 7-14. At age 15, campers can apply to be a Leader-in-Training (LIT). For two years, those selected for the LIT program participate in camp activities as well as specially designed team building and leadership activities. After successfully completing the two-year program, LITs are promoted to the role of Junior Counselor (age 17). Once these campers turn 18, they are eligible to apply for one of our volunteer counselor positions. Camp Surefire is staffed primarily by volunteers. Typically, about two-thirds of our counselors are former campers and the remainder are local college students studying health sciences, pharmacy, nursing, pre-med, etc.



At left: Carson, camper, age 16

“Going to camp has impacted my life in many ways. I have made friends through camp and learned about life and diabetes. It is kind of scary to go into a new environment, but I promise you will have a good time. I’ve seen firsthand how people can open up over the week many times.”

Q: How does Camp Surefire benefit the community, specifically with regards to those studying to be or just getting their start as clinicians or pharmacists?

A: Camp Surefire has had a strong partnership with the University of Rhode Island (URI) for more than 15 years. URI College of Pharmacy students can apply to serve as a counselor at Camp Surefire and receive credit as part of their service learning. Over the years, students from other Rhode Island institutes of higher education have also volunteered at camp in different positions. All of these students enhance their knowledge of type 1 Diabetes and gain valuable hands-on experience.

Q: What if someone cannot afford to attend to camp?

A: We do everything possible to ensure all kids and teens with type 1 diabetes can attend Camp Surefire. We subsidize the cost of camp for ALL families by keeping the tuition as low as possible. However, we know the camp tuition is still out of reach for many families. We provide campships (scholarships) to all families in need. To date, we have never turned away a child due to a family’s ability to pay tuition.

For more information about Camp Surefire, [visit www.campsurefire.org](http://www.campsurefire.org)