Aubry Andressen, a counselor at Camp Bon Coeur in Richard, takes a photo of her campers after they dressed up for the final evening of the summer program.

Camp Bon Coeur

Young heart patients find strength in each other.

Photos and Story by Claudia B. Laws

Two weeks ago, I spent a day with kids who had traveled from across the country to attend Camp Bon Coeur, or Camp Good Heart, in Richard. CBC is one of only a handful of summer camps in America geared specifically to kids with cardiac-related health problems. More than 50 campers, most of whom are between the ages of 8 and 16, attended this year's camp.

A few hours after I arrived, a group of campers cornered me.

"Why are you here? Why are you doing a story on us?" they asked.

I didn’t know what to say. To be honest, it was because these kids are different, because I had never heard of a specialty camp like this, because I wanted to see why they needed a special camp. But as soon as they asked, I realized that these kids come here because they don’t want to feel different. Camp Bon Coeur is a place where they can be themselves.

Before I even had time to process the question, the gaggle of campers joked with one another.

"It’s because we’re dying."

I stood in shock as the kids moved on unphased to their next activity.

I’ve never been comfortable talking about death, and I don’t think there are many of us who are. But to hear kids talk about it as though it is an everyday part of their lives is haunting. It seems like no one should have to deal with such issues — especially not a child.

The kids at Camp Bon Coeur aren’t dying, but they do have special needs. For one 10-day period out of the year, they get to be surrounded

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Aimee Fortier, a registered nurse from New Orleans, uses a dropper to deposit alcohol into the ears of camper Payton Cogburn, 7, of Lafayette. The alcohol helps prevent ear infections which are more likely in people with weakened immune systems.

Many campers have scars on their bodies from surgeries or transplants. Camp is one of the few places these kids feel comfortable revealing their physical reminders.

Christian Guillory, 12, of Lafayette climbs out of the pool after a swim with fellow campers.

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by others who understand where they have been and what they have experienced. They can use medical terms and be understood. They aren't babyed because of their heart conditions.

Camp Bon Couer, however, is prepared for its campers' medical needs. All counselors are CPR certified and carry CPR kits with them everywhere. Two registered nurses work full time handing out meds in the morning, noon and night. Although most injuries at the camp are the expected bug bites, sprained ankles and bumped heads, a crash cart sits in the corner of the infirmary for emergencies.

When I first arrived, a class was in session in the art room. The kids were painting shoes for a fund-raiser for the camp — each camper paints a shoe to signify walking a day in his or her shoes. I was prepared to see weak-bodied, sad children sitting in a circle sullenly working on projects. What greeted me shouldn't have shocked me, but it did. It was a typical art room, cluttered with paint splatters, half-dried art projects and teenage
Counselor Brandon Desormeaux (center) has the campers count out as they gather in line to head to lunch. Each camper has a number that is called out to make sure everyone is present.

Campers teasing the staff and mildly flirting with each other.

Although the campers' hearts may be physically challenged, the kids are emotionally strong. I've never seen such a large group of people from differing backgrounds be as polite or show as much care for one another. Teenagers don't shy away from their counselors' maternal hugs; they welcome the affection with open arms. Each person touched one another — a hug, a handshake or a quick high-five. As long as they were together, all seemed right in the world.

The day I visited was the last full day of camp. That night, campers and counselors gathered in what could loosely be called a circle. Everyone clasped hands in their yearly tradition. Camp

Director Susannah Craig told the group that she didn't sing well and apologized in advance. She began to sing "Linger," a song about remembering the time shared at camp. About halfway through the song, a multitude of voices joined hers. Craig's singing may not be the best in the world, but I've never heard anything as sweet as her voice gaining strength as she crooned that song.

The song was repeated over and over. Every couple of times through, Craig would call out a cabin name. That group hugged their goodbyes and returned to their cabin. The circle would tighten, and the campers would clasp the hands of the new people sitting next to them.

Shortly after the song began, tears were streaming down faces. Sobs provided an undercurrent to the sound of those still singing the melancholy tune. The practice continued until a very small ring of staff encircled the five graduating 16-year-olds.

Craig told the remaining campers to leave the circle. The graduates hugged the staff before departing for their rooms. Perhaps they'll be back next year as counselors-in-training, or

Information
Contact Camp Bon Coeur at 233-8437 or see Web site www.heartcamp.com.

Rebecca Flack, 15, of Atlanta, uses her fingers to paint a heart during an art session.

Jackie Looms, 21, of Cleveland, Ohio, wears a CPR kit attached to a belt loop. All counselors at Camp Bon Coeur are CPR certified.

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Laura Ventine, 16, of Naperville, Ill., waits to get calamine lotion to treat her bug bites. She sits near a crash cart that the camp's nurses keep on hand for emergencies.

Rebecca Flack hugs her friend Christina Fisher, 16, of West Palm Beach, Fla. Many of the campers attend the camp year after year and form very close friendships with one another.
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maybe this is their final goodbye.

Four of the five graduating campers have known one another from camp for years. For one, Travis, this was his first year at CBC.

Earlier that night, at a dinner banquet and awards ceremony, Swimming Instructor Fritz Simonson presented an award to Travis. Before presenting the award, “Mr. Fritz” talked about Travis’ inability to swim when he first arrived at camp and how he didn’t even want to take his shirt off.

“We’ve all been there,” Simonson said.

I hadn’t. I have a few pounds I wouldn’t mind hiding under a T-shirt while swimming, but I’ve never had to wear a shirt to hide a scar that I didn’t want to explain. The kids at Camp Bon Coeur must deal with questions for strangers about the scars that line their bodies. Beyond the physicality of their heart conditions, these kids must work through mental and emotional scars.

Counselors told me they see a change in the campers from day one to day 10. Confidence levels soar. Girls wear tank tops, almost proudly displaying their scars from surgery. The questions asked at camp are the same: “What happened?” But the responses aren’t uncomfortable or dumbed down or met with the fear of being judged. They are given in factual medical terms even a medical dictionary wouldn’t help me to decipher.

I don’t know why these kids are so special, but they have a knack for creeping into your heart. Perhaps it is because they are forced to confront the fragility of life early on and must grow up quickly. One second they are talking about a transplant they had a few years ago, and in the next breath, they are buying stuffed bears at the camp store.

I wish I could tell them now why I was there that day. The answer is simple: because of your strength.

Claudia B. Laws is a photographer with The Times. To comment on this article, e-mail timesedit@timesofacadiana.com.