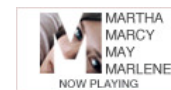


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## Separated in Foster Care, Siblings Reunite in Camp

By ALEXIS CLARK

KATTSKILL BAY, N.Y. — The crisp morning swims in Lake George were quite a change of pace for Shakeema, an 8-year-old from Far Rockaway, Queens. But so was spending five days straight with her sisters, Kendra, 10, and Marquia, 7, who live in the Bronx.

Shakeema, as well as 27 other children from New York State, arrived at camp loaded down with pillows, bathing suits and bug spray to spend a week upstate with their siblings who live in different foster homes.

Shakeema had last seen her sisters five months earlier. "They came for my birthday party," she said, flipping her beaded braids.

Camp to Belong, a nonprofit organization that reunites siblings separated in [foster care](#), recently opened its first camp in New York on the grounds of [YMCA Camp Chingachgook](#) in Kattskill Bay.

The organization was founded in 1995 in Las Vegas by Lynn Price, a former foster child who was separated from her sister growing up. It seeks to create healthy sibling relationships for foster children, who often have difficult family lives.

"I realized that my sister and I had no memories of when we were kids," Ms. Price said. "There were no memories of birthday parties, sharing clothes or helping each other with homework or talking about boys. I thought about the kids who will miss out on something that is so critical to their growth and feelings of unconditional love."

For Robin, 11, of Queens, the highlight of his Camp to Belong experience was wall climbing. "Or swimming with my brother," he said.

His brother, Alex, 9, lives in a different foster home in Queens.

"We've been in foster care a year," Robin said. "But we see each other every weekend."

"Not always," said Alex, making his way to a hammock. "It can get canceled."

There are now nine Camp to Belong sites, eight in the United States and one in Australia. The New York camp took a year and a half to organize, according to Joanne Trinkle, a social worker and the director of special projects for Parsons Child and Family Center in Albany, which sponsored the camp. (Ms. Trinkle asked that the last names of foster children not be disclosed to protect their privacy.)

"I met Lynn Price at a conference about six years ago," Ms. Trinkle said as she walked to the activity area for a tie-dyeing session with the children. "Her camp just stayed in the back of my mind. For me, my relationship with my brothers is the cornerstone of my life. So, to have the opportunity to bring siblings together to do things that are normal and that are fun was really important to me."

There are 24,605 children in foster care in New York State, 14,658 of them in New York City, according to official statistics.

Most of them are placed in foster homes with their siblings. But not always.

Elysia Murphy, a spokeswoman for the [city's Administration for Children's Services](#), said that foster families sometimes cannot accommodate siblings, and that some children have special needs that can be better managed in separate foster homes.

"Throughout the state and city, one of the priorities of reducing trauma of entering foster care is to keep the children together," Ms. Murphy said. "If that can't happen, then there are guidelines to arrange supervised visits for the siblings."

But arranging for siblings to see one another is not always easy.

"I had three siblings, and we were all separated into different kinship and foster homes," said Lourdes Santana, 23, an intern at Parsons Child and Family Center who is a camp counselor in New York. "Honestly, I really don't talk to my siblings that much anymore. They were so far away."

For Asiamonae, 16, of Ballston Spa, N.Y., spending time with her twin sister was the best part of Camp to Belong.

"I've been to camp before, but never with Alexa," she said of her sister, who lives in Niverville, N.Y., an hour and a half away. "I wish we could be here all summer. We see each other more regularly now, but the longest we've gone is two years. Things would get canceled because of transportation."

The meeting place is often at an agency.

“Visits can be tough and infrequent,” said Deborah Given, a mental health clinician from Graham-Windham, a child-welfare agency in New York City, who volunteered at the camp. “Many teens don’t want to be at an agency. They feel alienated from their siblings.”

One of the activities at the camp was to have siblings design superhero capes for each other.

“They question each other about what they like, so they know how to decorate the capes,” said Jahna Rymer, 20, a student at Siena College in Albany and a camp counselor. “They ask each other, do you like baseball, football, stuff like that. Since they don’t live together, they may not know. This gives them time to catch up.”

At a group birthday party, campers could make up for an occasion they may not have been able to spend together. A store was set up in the cafeteria, and campers were given gift cards to buy presents for siblings. Each group of siblings shared a little cake with their names on it.

“I threw cake at my sister,” Alexa said with a laugh, watching the other children line up for the wall climb.

Kendra pointed to the sparkling chain around her neck. “This is the necklace Marquia gave me for my birthday,” she said.