

# D'Amato: Faces light up when kids talk about Camp McGovern

*Waterloo Region Record*



*Kathy Schenk is able to send her daughters Kelsey Sharpe, left, and Kylie Sharpe to summer camp with help from the Kids to Camp fund.*

Kathy Schenk tries to give her 15-year-old twins the best life she can.

She and her family live on a part-time income as she tries to get a small business off the ground, providing foot care to elderly people.

The family lives in crowded conditions on the top floor of an older home in downtown Kitchener. Schenk saves on rent by cooking meals and doing housework for the owners of the home who live downstairs.

Her twins, Kelsey and Kylie Sharpe, never complain about where they live. But their faces light up when they talk about the summer camp near Hanover where they stay for several weeks a year.

That's when their whole world gets bigger.

At Camp McGovern, they can canoe in the Saugeen River. They can explore the green meadows and its wildlife. They can make new friends. They can take up a challenge and build their confidence.

And "if you win the Tidy Cabin (award) you get to look at the planets through the telescope," said Kelsey, her eyes shining.

In the city, it's difficult to see the stars. But in the remote countryside where the camp is located, they can lie on their backs on a clear summer night and watch shooting stars streak across the black sky. They can build a campfire, roast hotdogs and sing songs.

There's so much adventure, and yet they feel so comfortable.

"It's like a home away from home for me," said Kylie. "They're like my family."

The camp is there to provide this kind of life-changing experience for about 500 children a year, said director Greg Dow. All are from low-income families and sponsored by an agency like Big Sisters or Family and Children's Services. Most of them are from Kitchener and Waterloo

Like most of the families, Schenk pays whatever she can to help with the cost. But the difference is supplied by the Kids to Camp Fund, a charitable project of this newspaper and the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation.

It is administered by the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation and the Cambridge and North Dumfries Community Foundation, both of which also accept donations from the public.

Last year, the Kitchener-Waterloo portion of the fund helped to send 286 children to many different kinds of camps, both day and sleepover.

Kelsey has cerebral palsy. You can't tell when she is sitting down, but she needs a lift to get up and down the stairs. It's great for her that the camp is accessible for people with disabilities, and that some of the other children there are disabled too.

Last summer, the camp put together a "high ropes" course — a kind of obstacle course 13 metres off the ground. Kelsey was keen to try the course, but couldn't make it up the ladder by herself.

So the other campers used a pulley system to pull her up, and then there was no stopping her.

"There wasn't a dry eye at the end," Dow said.

That experience helped Kelsey get the confidence she needed to join the swim team this year at her high school, her mother says.

Many of the children at the camp have difficult lives for most of the year, Dow said.

"We look to create a safe space for kids to come and leave the things of home behind, the things of school behind — and just be kids," he said.

You can make a tax-deductible donation to the fund and send more children to camp this year.

Drop by the Record's downtown Kitchener office at King and Scott streets, or go onto the website of one of the community foundations — [www.kwcf.ca](http://www.kwcf.ca) or [www.cndfoundation.org](http://www.cndfoundation.org).

The home page of both those websites has instructions on how to give online for this cause.

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