

Inspiring stories of resilience

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Burn survivors with volunteers and Simeon Brown at Camp Awhi hosted by the Burn Support Group at Eastern Beach. Times photo Wayne Martin

Going from the banter, it's difficult to tell that practically every person in the Willow Park Christian Camp hall, Eastern Beach, has been through a trial by fire, literally.

Instead of stories of pain, depression, disfigurement, surgeries and survival, the kick-off to the five-day Children's Burn Camp Awhi being held after many years in east Auckland, feels like a happy and secure place to be.

As Michele Henry, co-ordinator of Camp Awhi hosted by the Burn Support Group, reassures some anxious parents whose kids are attending the camp (for ages 7-17) for the first time – the bubbly team leaders maintain and upbeat mood.

Ushering their teams to the beach for a stint of jet-skiing, the young team leaders share their stories with the *Times*, stressing that they are full of admiration for the brave, young burn survivors who show off their scars without being self-conscious.

Holly Timms, badly burnt at the age of one

“I am so grateful that I met all these amazingly courageous people at a Women’s Retreat for burn survivors. It was a very emotional experience and I felt lucky to be alive,” says 26-year-old Holly, as she keeps an eye on the young ones at Eastern Beach.

“It was at the retreat that Michelle asked if I’d like to volunteer as a team leader at Camp Awhi that instils confidence and teaches life skills to anyone with burn injury. I wish I knew of the camp earlier as I have spent my entire life fighting my scars.

“I was only a year old at a holiday home with my parents when I crawled to a cabinet with a broken kiddy-lock and opened a bottle of drain cleaner. The minute my mum realised what had happened, she picked me up and tried to wash my mouth, little realising that the liquid had spilt on my chest and on one side of my body. It was only when she tried to hand me over to the paramedics that she realised that my chest almost disintegrated.

“I had 25 per cent of burns on my body and have spent my whole life in and out of hospitals with skin grafts. “The difference though is that I don’t grieve for what I looked like before I got burnt. I have grown up with all those scars,” she says.



Brave and beautiful team leaders at Camp Awhi: Aroha Andrew (from left) Holly Timms, Jayne Swinburn and Marie-Charlotte Nahè. Photo supplied

Jayne Swinburn fainted on pot of boiling water

“It’s funny that it happened on April Fool’s Day. While training for a job in hospitality, I fainted in the kitchen on my first day at work! They were teaching us how to poach eggs. When I fainted I had a soup spoon in my hand to get the poached eggs. As my right hand was going into the pot to get the eggs, I fainted and brought the pot down with me. It was third degree burns. My whole life changed.

“Imagine that happening at work, everyone was so freaked out,” laughs the full-of-beans 22- year-old.

“Coming to the Women’s Retreat and then to Camp Awhi makes you realise you are not alone. It’s such a great opportunity to share, build relationships and give back to the community.

Aroha Andrew suffered severe burns in a house fire

“Being here for the kids is a huge privilege. Seeing them so happy despite what they have been through is a big reminder for me to be strong. They are a great inspiration to me, it’s humbling,” says a vivacious 25-year-old Aroha.

“It was four years ago that some piece of clothing that was close to the heater was the cause of a house fire. I had third degree burns. ”

Marie -Charlotte Nahè hiding her scars till now

“I wasn’t aware of the Women’s Retreat till I saw TVNZ’s programme called *Unbreakable* and heard Troy Hall’s story of resilience,” says 34-year-old Marie, who didn’t know who to contact for support after her accident.

“I got burnt in a cooking accident with hot oil – second degree burns on my arm. I am from France and it was really difficult surviving without my family at a time like this. I didn’t know any burn survivor. It was only after watching the programme that I got in touch with the Burn Support Group and attended the Women’s Retreat. I was hiding my burns till this summer but now, after watching the kids who are so strong and resilient, I feel empowered. I want to do a lot more to support them.”