

Youth connect at first South Island camp for burn survivors

Samantha Gee 12:22, Jan 31 2020



MARTIN DE RUYTER

Sean Porritt at Camp Awhi, an annual camp run by the Burn Support Group for survivors.

It's a hot summer afternoon in Nelson as a group of laughing kids run across a paddock through clouds of colour powder.

The 29 young people have come from around the country to meet in Nelson. The one thing they have in common is they all have scars that are the result of a burn injury.

The kids are taking part in the five-day Camp Awhi, an annual event for burn survivors.

The camp, organised by the Burns Support Group, has been running for about 20 years. This year marked the biggest event and the first to be held in the South Island at the Teapot Valley Christian Camp.

Levin teenager Sean Porritt has been to "burns camp" for a number of years. He looked forward to the event and said most of the kids had become long-time friends.



MARTIN DE RUYTER

Kids at Camp Awahi, held at the Teapot Valley Christian Camp, get sprayed with water by Brightwater Volunteer Fire Fighters.

The 15-year-old doesn't remember the incident in which he was burnt. He was about two-years-old when he climbed onto the stove in the family home and "messed around with the switches". Porritt was wearing nylon clothing at the time which caught on fire and burnt him from the stomach upwards.

"I always think of myself as a unique specimen.

"Because of my burns I was sort of a social outcast at primary school so I just developed my own sort of personality instead of following what the other kids did."

His favourite part of this camp had been the swimming, both in the pool at the camp and at Anchorage during a excursion in the Abel Tasman.

Mark Watson had travelled to Nelson with his son Tom for the camp, the second he had attended.



MARTIN DE RUYTER

It is the second time Tom Watson, centre, has attended Camp Awahi after he was burnt in a rubbish fire when he was eight-years-old.

Tom was burnt 18 months ago when an aerosol can exploded in a rubbish fire on the family's property in Hawkes Bay.

"He was 100 per cent on fire," Watson said.

"It had rained the night before so there was a puddle right there and I managed to put him out and we took him home and put him in the shower before the ambulance turned up."

Tom was in a coma for 12 days and spent a month in hospital recovering, first at Middlemore in Auckland then at Hutt Hospital in Wellington

Watson said Tom did not have any other friends in the Hawkes Bay who had experienced severe burns.

"It is nice to be amongst kids who have been through the same trauma and experience like he has."



MARTIN DE RUYTER

After being hosed down by firefighters, the kids at Camp Awahi take part in a colour run.

Tom, 10, was a "pretty hard out little dude" who wasn't phased about his scars.

"It will be interesting to see how he goes as he gets older, if he gets a bit more self-conscious about the way he does look.

"I think it's pretty cool, especially seeing the older kids and how they are confident, not too worried about being looked at or stared at."

Burn Support Group events co-ordinator Michele Henry said the annual camp enabled kids to build their self-worth and confidence and connect with others who had similar experiences.

"I think that's a really big thing for them, the realisation that 'I am not alone'."

She said the kids often had to deal with being stared at or hearing things said about their appearance.



MARTIN DE RUYTER

Burn Support Group events co-ordinator Michele Henry, right, said the camp gave kids a chance to connect with others who had similar experiences.

While the group were waiting to get on a boat at Kaiteriteri, Henry overheard a woman say to a staff member, "are you making me get on this boat with 20 of them?".

"I turned around and said, 'sorry love, you are on there with 29 of them'," Henry said.

"I just couldn't believe the insensitivity and they deal with this on a daily basis."

As well as a trip into the Abel Tasman National Park, each kid had been for a ride on the back of Harley Davidson, they had dinner at a local restaurant, the older kids had been go karting and played laser tag, had been visited by firefighters and taken part in a colour run.

Henry said the Burn Support Group fundraise all year round to be able to cover the whole cost of camp for participants and people were also able to sponsor a child to attend.