

In Memory of Abigail “Abby” MacNaughton

August 2012

For those of us who work at Camp Kawartha, we know camp to be a warm, nurturing place – a safe place where kids are encouraged to explore nature, to try new things and to develop new outdoor skills. In a way the camp represents a safe bubble, an enclave – a protective shell from the craziness of the outside world. We found that protective coating was severely shaken when we heard that one of our close staff members Abby MacNaughton passed away so suddenly. We tried to make sense of this. How could someone so young, spontaneous, vibrant and joyful be taken away so abruptly? The senselessness of it all was overpowering. For a time, this was all we could think about.

But when we shared stories about Abby – as we did around a remembrance campfire, or during spare moments in between programming – we realized something tremendously important. Abby, even though she wasn’t with us for a great length of time – taught each one of us something meaningful (I mean this in the full sense of the word – full of meaning).

For example; no matter what the weather, no matter what challenges were hurled her way, no matter what mood others were in, she always had a warm presence and a backpack full of enthusiasm. Her smile could lighten up even the crankiest among us. Here are some words our summer camp staff used to describe Abby: inspirational, dedicated, passionate, a wonderful teacher, a great advocate for nature, a warm and friendly person to be around. Campers who had Abby or ‘Quatzy’ as she was called in the summer, just loved her classes. She was unfailingly energizing. She had a knack for making things relevant for children, for finding the wonderful in the ordinary, for inspiring kids to see the natural world with new and fresh eyes. She was creative, fun living and whimsical. I think of her swishing her posterior to show how squirrels use their tails for balance, of how she coated herself in bubble wrap after opening some educational supplies and rolling herself down our hill towards the lake. Of how she took such care and delight in setting up the Jack Frost Nature Centre and how she committed herself to weeding and caring for the garden, even if the weeding part wasn’t her first joy.

Here are a few stories from fellow staff and campers:

***From Reiner Krueger:** There were three of us out on the range leading hikes, and we all agreed to come in at a certain time, because it was darker earlier, and it was quite cool out. Our group had a blast and stayed out on the range a little longer, did our Wolf Howl and I told a few stories. We showed up back at Camp and Abby's group still wasn't there. We waited for almost 45 minutes before she showed up, and it was just that they were having such an incredible time, seeing fireflies and constellations, and howling until their voices were gone, that she didn't want to bring them in!*

From the Mann Family: *There are no words to express how sorry I am about Abby. My son Liam Mann, had the privilege of being one of her students in the Camp's Eco Skills. "She was always happy and listened to me," he says. We promise not to forget what she taught...animal tracks, fire building, the importance of wetlands, her love of nature was contagious and she touched so many people. She will be so sadly missed because she was special. I hope you are all doing OK. Please accept our condolences and our grief.*

What we came to understand and perhaps this is something we can only fully realize when someone we care about is no longer with us, is that Abby's presence here with us was and will always be, a gift. The many things she taught us are her gifts as well. These are the kind of gifts that work best when they are carried forward. And it is our task to pass them along. The gift of joyfulness, of finding something positive even when the grind of day to day living overwhelms us. Of sharing our joy of nature and teaching this to others. Of being curious and allowing time to follow that curiosity, just to see where it takes us. Of spending time with children and exploring with them outside and playing and imagining with them. Of giving ourselves and others, permission to be amazed by beauty, by the unexpected and by the mysteries of this amazing world. And of course, the gift of adventure – of pushing our own boundaries so we can discover the world in new ways.

Thank you Abby for all of these things and more. It has been a privilege to know you, to share time with you and to learn from your warm and energizing presence. We pledge to teach kids to love the natural world, to protect it and to care for each other. We promise to try to find joy even in the smallest of things and to pass this on. We dedicate this garden in your memory and everything you stood for. Yours was life well and truly lived.

Obituary: <http://yourlifemoments.ca/sitepages/obituary.asp?oid=627763>