

PROFILE

Jeff's Story: Easter Seals Camp Gives Purpose, Changes Lives

When Jeff arrived at Easter Seals Ontario's Blue Mountain Camp, he wasn't looking for transformation—he was looking for direction. At 20 years old, he had taken a break from university, unsure of his next steps and looking to regain his footing. But when his younger brother encouraged him to apply for a job as a camp bus driver, Jeff had no idea that this single summer would change the course of his life.

Jeff quickly learned that Easter Seals camp wasn't just about fun and games. Each year, it gives hundreds of young people with physical disabilities a true sense of freedom and belonging that can be hard to find elsewhere. "They go to camp with like-minded kids. There are no judgments, there are no preconceived notions, just the chance to be kids," Jeff shares. Canoe trips, sailing, and archery—Easter Seals campers have the chance to take part in activities they may not have realized could be made accessible. "Just like every other kid deserves," Jeff says. "That's what makes Easter Seals camps special."

During that first summer, Jeff met many incredible campers who left a lasting impression on him. "I remember a camper named Tim. He had to be fed every day, toileted, placed onto his bed and back in his chair, and spent a lot of his day sitting on a cushion, but he was always laughing, smiling and enjoying every minute of his life," Jeff

shares. "The summer I spent with the kids at Blue Mountain literally changed my life."

After the summer, Jeff returned to university reinvigorated, earning top marks and graduating with confidence. Although Jeff had promising job prospects in his field, he turned down a full-time position to spend one more summer at Easter Seals camp—this time at Camp Merrywood.

Jeff was amazed to learn that Camp Merrywood had an entire teen independence program in an accessible building with kitchens and appliances at wheelchair height. "These older kids were learning how to cook, wash clothes, live independently. It was incredible."

After his two summers spent at Easter Seals camp, Jeff became deeply committed to inclusion and accessibility—values that continue to shape his work to this day. Recently, he was recognized with the Community Changemaker of the Year Award from March of Dimes Canada for his work with the city promoting inclusion and helping people with disabilities gain employment and internship opportunities. At the awards dinner in Toronto, Jeff experienced a powerful full-circle moment, when he found himself seated at a table with two guests in wheelchairs. After some conversation, he realized he knew them—from Easter Seals camp! "They were campers at Blue Mountain," he



Jeff and a young camper.

says, "and now they're married 18 years. They met at camp. My brother and his wife, who also met at Blue Mountain Camp, immediately recognized them when I sent over pictures."

Over the years, Jeff has also stayed closely connected with Easter Seals Ontario, having volunteered at Snowarama, lifeguarded accessible swim classes in his community, and helped organize and support community events. He has also been part of the Easter Seals Celebrity Hockey Classic series, Dancing with Easter Seals Stars event, and other initiatives in Sudbury to help raise crucial funds for Easter Seals Ontario's programs and services.

Reflecting on his first summer at Easter Seals Camp, Jeff doesn't hesitate. "It was my aha moment. I get emotional when I think about it, because I don't know where my life would be if I hadn't done it." Through his involvement, Jeff discovered a sense of direction, perspective and purpose that he carries with him to this day, continuing his work as a proud, lifelong supporter and advocate for individuals with physical disabilities. Jeff's story is a reminder that when we open our hearts to inclusion and accessibility, we don't just change lives—we transform our own.

For more information about Easter Seals Ontario visit www.easterseals.org