Footprints in the Sand Camp – a mum’s perspective

A couple of months ago my family – my husband Russell and I, my step-daughters Brittanee (20yrs), Ellie (14yrs) and my son Tim (11yrs) – attended a “Footprints in the Sand Camp” for bereaved families, put together and hosted by the team at Bear Cottage and located at the Collaroy Centre.

To be honest, we weren’t excited about the camp in the lead up to it. The week before the camp occurred marked the one year anniversary since our darling Hugo went to heaven and it had been a month of really rocky emotions, especially with all three children. Russ certainly didn’t feel like going somewhere and ‘talking about his feelings’ but we absolutely knew that this camp would be very significant for Britt, Ellie and Timmy and would give us a mini holiday together as a family at this important time. Little did we know how much each one of us would be impacted.

It didn’t matter that the location was not at Bear Cottage, we were still met on the Friday night with that comfortable, warm embrace that we, as parents who have been blessed enough to have been on the receiving end of Bear Cottage’s care, know so well. We were immediately disarmed from whatever negativity we had built up in our minds and found ourselves feeling so open and responsive to getting to know the other eight families that attended the camp.

I soon recognised the incredible camaraderie and bond we all shared having all been through caring for a sick child and the loss of that child. The carefully planned and organised activities really helped this along – from fun water activities including canoeing on Narrabeen Lake, family yoga, Ten Pin Bowling and pampering sessions for mums, to wonderful arts and crafts activities for all the family.

Outside the walls of Bear Cottage, I have never seen teenagers relate to each other the way the girls who attended the camp related to each other. Ellie, our 14 year old, had found the previous month particularly hard. She was very connected to Hugo, shared a room with him and seemed to be the hardest hit yet the quietest about it out of the three kids. We saw our rather dark, shut down girl open up like a beautiful joyful flower on this camp as she shared her heart with her new friends, laughed, cried and experienced a new freedom.

Even Brittanee, who is older and at university, got so much out of the camp saying, “I really, really, really loved it. I love how daggy and comfy and how real everyone was, like a big extended family. I wish there was another one soon”.

Even the menfolk, who we all know are so good at sharing their feelings, opened up after a bonding session of ten-pin bowling and a couple of beers. My husband Russell said that he has never seen anything like it before. A group of eight guys, sitting together in a group and listening to each other face the realities of continuing life after losing a child. Russell found such compassion, strength and sense of belonging with this amazing group of men and he said that it helped him face some emotions and thoughts he had been feeling head on rather than avoiding them.

The last evening was capped off by a puppet/shadow production put together by all of the children and the lovely art therapist Trypheyna – an unforgettable performance that touched on the children’s journey when they gained entry into the wonderful Bear Cottage. There wasn’t a dry eye in the audience as we saw our children, some of whom would never voluntarily venture in front of the spotlight (including our Tim) shine.

On the last day, the sun shone as we ventured down to the coastline at Collaroy Beach for a BBQ. We made boats, filling them with petals, decorations and little notes about our lost child and as a family, set them off into the water whilst having some time to remember Hugo and what he means to us – a remarkably touching and beautiful way of completing our camp.

We, as a family, are forever changed because of this camp. We have met so many amazing people, made new friends for life but above all, Bear Cottage has provided a safe place for families to face some of their feelings and emotions that grief brings, head on. We were also able to normalise a lot of what we are going through on this journey of grief by being around other families and realising so many similarities.

The team at Bear Cottage is exceptional – the entire weekend was done with great thoughtfulness, grace and love and we can only imagine how much time and effort went into the organisation of what I consider a weekend of breakthrough for every family that was present.

Thank you Sue, Philly, Trypheyna and the volunteers that made this weekend happen. I know I say this on behalf of every family, a big heart-felt THANK YOU!

Love Tina x