

THE TRANSFORMATION

"So you want to spend next summer working with disabled children? You must be out of your mind!" I could hardly believe my ears. Was this my nephew, Michael, the "vunder-kind" who had just breezed through college majoring in pizza shop and fast cars? He had already

surprised us once by getting accepted to a top law school on the first try, but this was absurd. I just couldn't imagine my fun-loving nephew spending a whole summer playing

nursemaid to a bunch of handicapped children at the HASC Summer Camp in the Catskills.

"Michael," I said gravely, "I admire the sentiment, but I'll bet that you don't last ten days in such a place. Wouldn't you rather take a counselors job at a normal camp with all your friends, or maybe a job clerking in a law firm for the summer? I'm sure some of my lawyer friends could pull some strings for you." But Michael was adamant, and despite (or maybe because of) everyone's warnings, he actually went through with it.

So it came to be one beautiful late summer afternoon, as I was driving back to the city from upstate through the general vicinity, that I decided to detour off exit 99 on Route 17 to drop in on my favorite nephew, to see how his unlikely job was working out, and maybe offer him a ride home. I called ahead, and when I pulled into the camp grounds, Michael came running up to greet me.

"So, uncle, when are you going to pay up on our bet?" Michael said with that mischievous grin on his face. "Actually, I only have a few minutes before I have to pick up my kids from their therapists, but I'm glad you came."

As we strolled down the rolling green lawn, I couldn't help but notice how fit and happy Michael looked. "But I must admit," he went on, "you came very close to winning. Those first few days... I thought I would go out of my mind! It can be so frustrating working with them — their progress is so slow. It wasn't until I got to know them, working with them every day, feeding them, dressing them, encouraging them, that I began to appreciate them as people. Now, I look at

them as my friends."

Michael pointed to a little boy in the corner of the playground. "Over





there is Jackie. Seven years old with Down's Syndrome. When he came here, he communicated only through grunts and a simple sign language, and never spoke a single word. But a teacher here, Rob Bernstein, decided to prove that Jackie could speak. He worked with him hour after hour, day after day, using a variety of multi-sensory techniques. I tried to help out, too, keeping the therapy going in the bunk, day and night, as much as possible.

"For weeks, there was no sign of progress. Then, one day at the playground, Rob was giving Jackie a ride on



a swing, repeating the word "push" each time he set the swing in motion. Out of nowhere, Jackie pursed his lips and made the sound "p—sh." It was as if that first word broke the logjam. That very afternoon, he said the word, "more," and the next day, "go." The next week, when we asked him where he wanted to go that day, Jackie said, "park," and, now he is beginning to put the words he has learned into phrases.

"You can just imagine the scene here on Visiting Day, when Jackie

started to talk in front of his mother and father. They cried like babies with happiness, and me, Mr. Macho, I even shed a tear or two myself," Michael admitted sheepishly. "Oh-oh there are my kids. Gotta run. Send regards to Mom and Dad for me. Tell them I'm doing great!"

Michael obviously wasn't going home with me, so I decided to have a look around. On the surface, HASC Camp looks like so many others, with all of the recreational facilities you would expect, I discovered that the crucial difference lies in the almost one-to-one ratio between staff and campers, and the close cooperation between the educational specialists and the counselors. They all share the same dedication to giving their "special" children the best possible chance to fulfill their maximum potentials. Its supportive, religious environment gives 240 retarded children and adults from all Jewish backgrounds a new dimension in their lives, a new sense of hope. It had even given my nephew, Michael, a new perspective on the simple wonders of life that we all take for granted.

As I drove back to the city, I began to wonder whether I myself might have something to learn from the very special children I had met at the HASC Camp, and the dedicated staff, made up of people like Michael, who provide them with such loving and professional care.

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