

AbilityFirst Camp Paivika: Creating Change in the Lives of All Participants



Kathy Braxton (l) with Leslie Salmon-Zhu (r) at Camp Paivika, Summer 2016.
Photo by Jessica Morrison for AbilityFirst.

(LOS ANGELES – July 29, 2016) Twenty-year-old undergrad Leslie Salmon (now Leslie Salmon-Zhu) was considering a career in special education when she stepped up to the AbilityFirst outreach booth at a California State University Northridge job fair in the mid-1970s. Little did she know that her decision to apply for a summer job as an Arts & Crafts Specialist at Camp Paivika would change the course of her life, leading to a career in rehabilitation counseling and a stint in then-Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley’s office, working specifically for the rights of people with disabilities.

Camp Paivika is a fully-accessible camp in Crestline running multiple sessions during the summer months for children and adults with disabilities, and it is also available for rentals in the off-season. During her first of three consecutive summers working at camp, Leslie met camper Elissa Nadel. “I had never met anyone who was non-verbal, but Elissa and I ended up communicating for hours and she suggested that when summer session ended I apply for a position with the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation in Sylmar.” On Leslie’s first day working at the Foundation, she met Kathy Braxton.

Kathy’s file described her as “severely, profoundly, mentally retarded with extremely limited verbal skills” but all that Leslie saw in her arts and crafts class was a bright, involved, funny and fully-engaged person. They became friends and shared stories of their experiences at AbilityFirst camps (Kathy at Camp Joan Mier and Leslie at Camp Paivika) where Leslie had been promoted from a specialist position to camp counselor. Leslie eventually left Southern California for San Leandro in the San Francisco Bay Area, but she and Kathy kept in touch and shared many life experiences with each other – from boyfriends to breakups to normal ups and downs.

Now, “Every time I’m back in Los Angeles, I visit Kathy and we chat about life,” says Leslie. “She’s shared with me that it is sometimes difficult to find services that respect her abilities, wants, and needs. Although Kathy had been a camp regular for more than 30 years, her family grew concerned that due to some medical issues she was facing that Kathy may not have a successful camp experience.” Kathy didn’t return to camp for almost ten years.

After that near decade-long absence from Camp Paivika, Leslie advocated to Kathy’s family that they pay for a hospital bed rental that made it possible for Kathy to return to camp in 2015 along with her sister Patty as her 1:1 support person. A 1:1 support provides 24/7 caregiving with support from AbilityFirst staff. That effort was so successful that this year, Leslie and Kathy were reunited at Camp Paivika with Leslie returning after 30 years as Kathy’s 1:1 support.



AbilityFirst aims to make Camp Paivika programs and services respectful, fun, and engaging. Says Kathy, “Here at camp, people are looking for what I *can* do as opposed to what I *can’t* do. I am accepted for exactly who I am. People understand me here, and love me. I think about camp all year long and then when I finally get here, it’s just like a dream. I get a chance to be like everyone else, people respect me and understand my needs and talk with me all the time. I love it here at Camp Paivika.”

“Camp Paivika is a pivotal moment in the lives of the people who come here,” said Leslie. “AbilityFirst gives people a feeling beyond acceptance; it is a feeling of possibility and capability that most often isn’t found anywhere else in the lives of people with disabilities. Of course the people at AbilityFirst collect campers’ records (challenges, diagnosis, allergies, etc.) and they are very sensitive and responsive to that, but counselors and staff are trained to look for possibility for the human being *first*. Every pool session, every art class, every performance starts with possibility.”



Leslie Salmon-Zhu (l) with Kathy Braxton (c) and Tony the Horse (far left) at Camp Paivika, Summer 2016. Photo by Jessica Morrison for AbilityFirst.

Kathy is particularly proud of being able to do things at Camp Paivika she wouldn’t normally be given an opportunity to do which helps her overcome other fears she holds. She had always loved looking at the horses at Camp Paivika but never wanted to participate in any activity with them, such as brushing or feeding. With her counselor by her side and her confidence soaring, Kathy was able to meet and interact with Tony, one of three of the beautiful Camp Paivika horses (photo left).

Leslie sums up, “This camp taught me to see what is possible. I built my personal and professional ethics around what I learned here back in the 1970s. Camp Paivika taught me at a very young age to live my life, my ethics, and my career focusing on the possibilities all around me rather than the lack thereof. It is more than camp; more than swimming, nature, and arts and crafts. Camp Paivika, for both staff and participants, is very literally a transformational life experience.”

[High resolution versions of these photos are available by contacting communications@abilityfirst.org or calling 626.396.1010. Sheri A. Lunn, Sr. Director of Communications & Marketing](mailto:communications@abilityfirst.org)

About AbilityFirst

[AbilityFirst](#) provides a variety of programs designed to help people with disabilities achieve their personal best throughout their lives. We do this by: creating targeted programming to help an individual successfully transition from childhood to adult life; providing employment preparation, training, and experience; building social connections and independence; and, offering both our participants and their caregivers an opportunity to refresh and recharge through our recreational activities.

Located in the beautiful San Bernardino National Forest, AbilityFirst [Camp Paivika](#) offers overnight summer programs for children and adults with disabilities. These programs provide a traditional camp experience with nurturing support and an emphasis on fun. It is one of the first fully accessible camps in the United States. Camp Paivika has helped thousands of children and adults with disabilities make friends, try new activities, and become more confident and independent. As campers enjoy their Camp Paivika experience, families and caregivers can take a break from the rigors and challenges of providing 24/7 care, knowing that their loved ones are safe – cared for and having fun. Camp Paivika is also available for rental each year from January to May. The beauty and privacy offered by this historic property makes Camp Paivika the perfect camp rental facility for meetings, retreats, weddings, and other special events.