

Dr. Jen Reichek, MD, MSW

Jen Reichek, MD, MSW, aka Dr. Jen, fulfills many demanding roles – attending physician, expert in pediatric cancer and blood disorders, director of the STAR survivorship program, professor, social worker, marathon runner, wife and mother, to name a few. And yet, while juggling these multiple responsibilities, she also finds time to serve as a valued, longtime medical volunteer with Camp One Step – which, she says, is one of the most rewarding and joyful parts of her already very full life.

Camp One Step provides free opportunities for pediatric cancer patients, survivors and their families to enjoy in-person and virtual camp. The experiences change lives, and not just for the campers and their families but for the volunteers as well, according to Dr. Jen.

“When I am burdened by the sad parts of my job and I really need a refresh, I think about camp and the kids. And I remember that’s my why,” she says. “Being at camp changes you. And you just can’t imagine how much until you’ve spent time there with these incredible kids, as well as the amazing staff and volunteers.”

Dr. Jen says her positive experience has inspired her to share the Camp One Step story with colleagues, such as physicians, nurses, child-life specialists and hospital administrators. She says the medical team is an important link between the organization and potential campers, often providing education about the programs for families in need of support, strength and connection.

Dr. Jen has been encouraging her patients, as well as fellow medical professionals, to experience Camp One Step ever since she was introduced to the organization in 2008. She had just moved from Philadelphia to Chicago to work at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital and was asked to accompany a group of teenagers to Washington, D.C., where they were going to advocate along with Camp One Step for increased funding for pediatric cancer research. She says she was inspired as she spent time with the kids – who were fighting their own battles, yet still wanted to use their voices to make a difference for others.

Dr. Jen found renewed energy after the experience in D.C. For so long, she had only seen her young patients in the hospital, but that trip reminded her that they have a whole other life outside of that setting – a life where they find reasons to laugh and soar in spite of the daily challenges they face.

It didn’t take long for Dr. Jen to become a Camp One Step volunteer. She started by helping attend to medical needs at in-person Summer Camp in Wisconsin. “So began my love for camp,” she recalls.

Camp One Step is for children up to 19 years old who are in various stages of treatment or in remission, along with their parents/guardians and siblings. Camp – whether in person or virtual – empowers participants to be silly and play, laugh and learn, practice a favorite hobby or try

something new, meet new friends and greet old ones, and share support and inspiration. Camp targets kids of all abilities, including those who have experienced physical and cognitive changes. Camp is always accessible and inclusive and focuses on “what you can do, not what you can’t do.”

Dr. Jen says that when she volunteered at her first in-person camp, she immediately saw how the experience encourages kids to be kids no matter what they might be going through, and how it surrounds them with a community that understands and brings a sense of normalcy that is often lacking. “In their regular lives, they are always the kid who has cancer,” she says. “But at camp, I have seen kids who are depressed and burdened by their illness get involved, flourish and find the joy in life again.”

She adds that Camp One Step also supports the extended family, through the annual Sibling Camp and other sibling opportunities, as well as in-person and online breakout groups for parents. “Even though you see other families in waiting rooms, having a child with cancer can be very isolating,” according to Dr. Jen. “But at Camp One Step, the baseline understanding is that you can talk about what you’re going through if you want, but you don’t have to. Either way, people will get it and will be there for you.”

In 2010, Dr. Jen joined the Camp One Step staff as medical director, a position she held for several years, working part time to help establish the medical policies and procedures that are in place today. Eventually, due to her already busy schedule as a physician, she transitioned back to being a medical volunteer at camp, a role she continues to cherish. She also has been a member of the Board of Directors and continues to serve as physician advisor and head the Medical Advisory Committee.

The strong medical framework that Camp One Step has in place is essential, according to Dr. Jen, because it gives parents and guardians of in-person campers peace of mind and confidence that their kids, no matter where they are in their health journey, will receive the attention and expert care they need while away from home and their usual support system.

Dr. Jen strongly recommends that any medical professional who works with pediatric cancer patients and their families learn about Camp One Step and be ready to offer it as an option to families who might be able to attend one of the in-person camps that are held for free throughout the year.

But she also encourages hospital staff to spread the word about Camp One Step’s digital camps, the free online programming that Camp One Step initially created in 2020, after the pandemic forced the organization to pause in-person camps and activities. Today, digital camps are strong, with a vibrant schedule of single or multi-day “live” programs that participants pre-register for, as well as on-demand activities that live on the website.

Digital Camps, which can be done from any location, extends the Camp One Step community to campers and families who are unable to attend in-person camp due to hospitalization, or

because of where they live, their illness or any logistical reason. It also can serve campers when in-person camp is out of session.

“Digital Camps are perfect for any family wanting or needing an online option,” Dr. Jen says. “We learned a lot during the pandemic about how to bring these experiences to kids in a virtual format. We are broadening the definition of what camp is, and that has been a gift for so many participants.”

She adds that she loves to hear that her adolescent and teen patients are enjoying digital Camps, because these older age groups can be difficult to reach in the hospital setting. Sometimes they don’t want to come out of their room, and they might not be interested in the teen lounge, so they end up spending a lot of time looking at their phones. But when they get into a digital activity room, or take part in a group craft or science experiment, they no longer feel so alone and different from their peers.

Dr. Jen adds that the on-demand programs, which can be done independently at any time, are especially beneficial because the activities are always accessible and ready to go. Kids get diagnosed every day, and you never know when that moment might be and when they might want instant access to these programs and resources. On-demand categories include STEAM, wellness, food, online games, and songs and playlists.

Dr. Jen stresses the importance of trusted members of a patient’s medical team advocating for opportunities like Camp One Step, particularly the flexible option of digital camps. “As caregivers, we sometimes focus solely on the medical aspect of a patient’s experience and forget about the importance of psychosocial care and support,” Dr. Jen says. “But here we have these free opportunities that bring joy and help kids and their families feel less isolated. And all we have to do is make sure they have the information and, maybe, provide a little encouragement.”

She adds that there’s nothing better than seeing kids who are supported, engaged and thriving thanks to Camp One Step. “It is truly a rejuvenating experience to hear their laughter and witness the spirit and power of camp.”