

The Knox/Carrasco Family

The teen years can be a challenging time, especially for kids who feel they don't always fit in. But for a young person who is fighting cancer – while living in a foreign country – the loneliness can get overwhelming at times.

That's how 18-year-old Annika Carrasco often felt while growing up in Ecuador. After being diagnosed with medulloblastoma at age nine, she dealt with years of treatment, mostly in Wisconsin, followed by its lingering effects. "Going back to school in Ecuador was tough because people didn't understand me, and my community was not always accepting," recalls Annika.

Shortly after she was diagnosed, Annika's family discovered Camp One Step, and she was able to attend in-person camps while receiving treatment in Wisconsin and on trips to visit family over the summers. But each time she returned home to Ecuador, she felt disconnected once again.

In 2020, Camp One Step's digital camps were launched, and Annika's life changed for the better. She suddenly had a place she could go at any time to experience the joy, fun and support of camp. It no longer mattered as much that her Camp One Step friends and counselors were on another continent – because she could connect with them virtually via the new digital programming.

Camp One Step's digital camps provide single or multi-day programs that are scheduled throughout the year, plus on-demand activities that live on the website. They were developed while in-person camps were halted during the pandemic but have continued and grown. It is now popular among pediatric cancer patients and their families who want a virtual option.

Annika recalls many favorite digital camp memories, including when the popular Dude Ranch Camp was moved to an online format during the pandemic. Staff at the ranch introduced the horses via Zoom, and campers worked together virtually to make horse treats and horse blankets, they played horse-themed games and trivia, and they learned line dances. Annika participated from her hospital bed in Ecuador, after having her appendix removed. She also fondly recalls an Olympics-themed session where participants skated on camera and rated each other, a New Year's Eve party where they made "mocktails" with juice and pop rocks, and a group painting activity where everyone painted a dolphin and sunset.

But as fun as the organized activities are, Annika says the best part of the digital camps is informally hanging out with fellow campers in breakout rooms at the end of the day. For one program, Camp One Step sent plug-in campfire lights and s'more makers so the campers could feel like they were gathered around the fire.

Annika has cherished these opportunities over the years. She was fortunate to travel to Wisconsin for in-person camps several times, and she says digital camps filled the void

whenever she was back home in Ecuador and feeling so far away. She remembers sometimes struggling to get through the school day. But if a digital camp was scheduled that afternoon or evening, it was “the light at the end of the path.”

“I love having the chance to connect with people like me. It doesn’t matter if we’re not physically in the same room or place, I still feel like I’m right next to them,” she says. “It makes me so happy to see my fellow campers, and to be able to give new campers who are going through treatment some encouragement.”

Camp One Step – whether in person or virtual – provides the chance to be part of a community that truly knows what the ups and downs of the pediatric cancer journey are like, which is something that friends and family – as hard as they might try – can’t fully grasp, according to Annika. “Other people just don’t understand what you’ve been through in the same way as this community,” she says.

Through in-person and digital camps, Annika has made friends whom she stays in touch with via frequent text messages. She believes they’ll be in each other’s lives forever.

Today, Annika is doing well and is attending her freshman year of college in Wisconsin. She plans to become a Camp One Step counselor in the future. Her mom, Mollie Knox, says the family is incredibly grateful to have made it to this point with a “best-case scenario.” But she says it’s hard to forget those early days of Annika’s illness, her eight rounds of chemo and the many hardships along the way.

Annika was diagnosed on New Year’s Eve in 2015, while visiting her grandparents in Wisconsin. While she was having radiation and chemotherapy there, her mom learned about Camp One Step. The family was able to attend Brain Tumor Family Camp, and Annika took part in Summer Camp.

Mollie says these experiences provided Annika with the distraction and friendship that she desperately wanted. “But the support for our whole family was just as important, because we were kind of lost and really needed it,” Mollie recalls.

Camp One Step provides opportunities for parents to talk about their experiences, both during in-person camps and in breakout groups that are part of their digital camps. Mollie says there are so many things that a parent who has a child with cancer needs to know, but they’re not the kinds of topics discussed in doctor visits – like how the IEP process works at school; navigating participation in sports, activities and social opportunities; and looking after the mental health of your child with cancer but also the siblings and yourself.

“Connecting with other parents helped me navigate so much of it,” Mollie says, “because during treatment, you’re in this suspended mode of trying to get through each day. But when that part ends and real life begins again, it can be hard to step back into the world you were in before, while advocating for your child and teaching them to advocate for themselves.”

Mollie says she also benefitted from parents sharing their wisdom on things that seem small now but were critical at the time – like having plenty of popsicles on hand for after surgery and using chewing gum to ease nausea.

In addition to this kind of essential support, Mollie says the most important thing about Camp One Step is that it gives kids who are fighting cancer the sheer joy of being a kid at camp – whether in person or virtual – and a real sense of belonging.

“There’s no judgment at camp. Outside of our family, it’s the place where Annika feels the most accepted,” she says. “Honestly, it has been wonderful, and I can’t imagine our lives without it.”