

The Stargardt Family

For some children who have been fighting cancer from a very young age, relating to peers can be difficult as they mature, especially if their illness has limited activities and interactions throughout their childhood. This was the case for 13-year-old Jay Stargardt, a Wisconsin boy who was diagnosed with stage four neuroblastoma at 13 months and later developed chemotherapy-induced leukemia. He has spent years in treatment, including receiving a bone marrow transplant.

Jay's mom Bridget discovered Camp One Step when her son was about eight years old, and that discovery has been life changing for the entire family.

"Kids who go through this journey sometimes have trouble fitting in. Jay spent his childhood interacting only with adults – doctors, nurses and family. It was a different way to grow up, so it was hard for him around other kids," Bridget explains. "In addition, a lot of people who have an oncology history have things that make them different, and the world is not always accepting of that."

But the thing that's so unique about Camp One Step is that everyone belongs, according to Bridget. "It is always welcoming and inclusive, no matter what your differences might be."

Jay's experience with Camp One Step began in 2019 with in-person camps, which opened his world and helped him gain confidence to do things outside the shelter of his family. "He had to be only in our orbit for so long. So when he was able to go out and try new things and experience life through camp, it made a huge difference in his social development," Bridget says.

But then the pandemic hit, and Jay, along with hundreds of other kids, could no longer benefit from long, joyful days spent with camp friends.

Thankfully, the pause did not last long, as Camp One Step staff quickly developed engaging, user-friendly virtual content and got it out to the community. The Stargardt family immediately embraced the opportunity to take part in Digital camps

At first, they participated while staying with relatives who lived near the hospital where Jay was receiving treatment. "We became close with my aunt and uncle during that time, and it was special for them to be able to do digital camp art projects, cooking demos, games and more right along with us," Bridget says.

Since then, the family also has participated in digital camps from home, from hotels, even while vacationing in an RV.

Now that in-person gatherings have resumed, Jay is once again an enthusiastic participant in Summer Camp, Dude Ranch Camp and other programs. But the family continues to value Camp One Step's single or multi-day Digital camps, as well as the many on-demand activities.

Bridget says the fact that digital camps can be done at any time from any location makes it extremely appealing to their family, because they are often on the go. When Jay was diagnosed, Bridget and her husband, Travis, would spend some of their long hospital days looking at travel books and dreaming of future trips. Now they like to get out in the world as a family as often as they can.

So they love the flexibility of digital camps. Jay recalls going on hikes with his parents while doing camp science experiments, and sitting outside the RV while playing games like Giant Jenga on Zoom with other families.

When families register for single or multi-day digital camps, they receive a care package of supplies for the planned activities. Jay says seeing the box full of surprises is a highlight that the entire family looks forward to, and they try to make it a production and open it all together – “but sometimes my mom just can’t wait,” he says.

Bridget and Jay say that one of the unexpected benefits is that the digital offerings can provide valuable preparation for attending an in-person camp. So many kids fighting cancer have had limited exposure to common childhood activities, and sudden involvement in an overnight camp might be overwhelming.

For example, Bridget says, Jay was frequently in the hospital as a baby and toddler and didn’t get to play outside much – he didn’t go down a slide until he was almost five. For kids like that, Digital camps can be an important entry into the wonderful world of the in-person Camp One Step experience.

In addition to the substantial benefits for young campers, many digital camps also meet the needs of parents, with opportunities for adults to discuss what they’re going through and offer support to one another. Bridget says these breakout groups have been a source of strength for her and Travis, giving them perspective and helping them validate their feelings. “Everyone shows up as they are, and we’re all accepted and understood – no matter where we are in the journey or where we’re coming from on that day,” she says.

Bridget and Jay say this is similar to the deep connections the kids form with each other – whether attending camp virtually or in person. For example, Jay, an only child, says he loves sharing a cabin with friends when he attends Summer Camp, because it’s like having “siblings for a week.”

Today, Jay is doing well and continues to be closely monitored. He’s come incredibly far, especially considering he didn’t have verbal language until after second grade. Just five years later, he is wise beyond his years – “13 going on 45,” according to his mom.

Jay describes Camp One Step’s in-person and digital camps as essential parts of his growth. They have helped him make new friends and extend beyond a comfort zone that was centered around his family for so many years.

Bridget adds that she and her family are grateful for Camp One Step opportunities, staff and volunteers and have tried to support the organization in any way they can – by sharing their story, fundraising, volunteering and Travis running a marathon with Team One Step.

“I can’t emphasize enough how much Camp One Step has meant to us. We’ve gotten so much more than we’ve given,” she says.