



NEW WORLDS, NEW DREAMS, ONE SUMMER AT A TIME

A child's smile says it all.

It's hard to imagine the excitement children from New York City's underserved communities feel when they discover what lies beyond the city limits. Vast expanses of grass, perfect for playing tag. Swimming, archery, guitar lessons. Roasting s'mores around a roaring campfire. For more than 145 years, The Fresh Air Fund has been giving kids the gift of a summer adventure outside the city – new experiences, new relationships, new hopes and dreams.

What does it mean to them? Their smiles tell the story.

the *Fresh Air* fund
because a summer can last a lifetime™



Image: Courtesy of the Welsher Family



Image: Katie Borrazzo

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Children form lifelong friendships at The Fund's Camp Hidden Valley in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley.

Kayaking at The Fund's Camp Junior in New York's Harriman State Park is always an adventure.

Rayane was excited to catch a fish when he visited the Welsher family in Penfield, New York.

Campers, like Allana, enjoy meeting the animals at the Model Farm.

Spending time by the waterfront is a favorite activity for campers.

Campers explore their creativity during arts and crafts.

Trying new activities, like archery, is an essential part of camp.





EMPOWERMENT AND ADVENTURE: CAMP ABC IGNITES CONFIDENCE & FRIENDSHIP

PAYING IT FORWARD

ABOVE: (From left to right) Adara, Hasseena, Antoinette, Jeniffer, Jocelyn and Kristin build communication and leadership skills in the Camp ABC Counselor-in-Training program.

BELOW LEFT: At Camp ABC, girls make new friends and return home with special memories.

BELOW RIGHT: Children from Camp ABC enjoy petting animals at the Model Farm.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: Campers practice their aim in archery.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: Becky, a Camp ABC alum, has been a part of The Fresh Air Fund community for 13 years.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: The ASCAP Foundation partners with The Fresh Air Fund to provide guitar lessons for campers.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Campers have fun playing soccer at Camp Hidden Valley.

What helps a girl feel strong and confident? For some it's swimming in a lake for the first time. For others it's crossing a high-wire 25 feet up or experiencing unconditional acceptance when expressing her true self.

Camp ABC, for girls ages 9 to 15, is all about having fun while growing, exploring the outdoors and learning new skills. It's about making friends and cheering each other on while learning to swim or dance, or trying a new activity like guitar, boating or archery. All of it is geared to helping girls feel strong, confident, and positive about their abilities and their futures.

When the girls arrive, many are nervous and shy, but by the end of camp, they stroll around as if they've been there forever. By day three, Donalis and Miliyani feel like they've known each other their whole lives; to cement their bond, they made each other friendship bracelets, intricately woven with complementary colors of blue, purple and yellow.

Imani, 12, just shot her first arrow during archery. "I haven't gotten a bullseye yet, but if I practice more, I know I will." Eliana, adjusting to her first summer at camp, especially enjoys swimming, boating and the planetarium. "We learned about constellations, and now I can even find the big dipper myself."

The younger girls are wildly excited about a scavenger hunt based on "The Amazing Race." The whole camp celebrates carnival, topped off by a talent show showcasing campers performing elaborately choreographed dances, belting out heartfelt self-written songs, telling jokes and strumming instruments. Other nights they savor gooey s'mores, lie in the meadow gazing at stars, and play frisbee at a beach party by the lake. And no one wants it to end.

LIFE BY THE WATER

Eleven pairs of girls lined up by the waterfront holding hands, getting ready for swim lessons in the lake.

Many girls, standing in the shallow end, are nervous beginners. Others already know how to swim. "My grand-

mother taught me to swim, that's why I'm good enough to come in the deep end," humble-bragged Keiralye, 11. "I've never swam in a lake before though, it's a little colder than I thought."

The lake is staffed by lifeguards and trained instructors, including Martina, 21, a swimming champion from Poland. She was thrilled with the opportunity to spend the summer in the U.S., teaching swimming to kids. At first she was nervous about adjusting to the culture. But now she's in camp heaven. "This is a wonderful experience," she said. "I love the children and the other counselors, there's nothing like this back home."

FROM FARM TO TABLE

Next up: the campers walk through the woods to the expansive garden at The Fresh Air Fund's Model Farm. They were amazed at the fresh basil — and enthusiastically sampled it and the other herbs and vegetables, like cilantro and carrots.

"This tastes so fresh," said Jemily, 11, shaking her head in wonder. As Allana, 12, and her friends wandered the garden, they saw rhubarb for the first time, and savored raspberries, peas and string beans, marveling at how good everything tasted.

The farm is managed by Nicki Bogie, a program coordinator who also oversees the camp nutrition program. Nicki demonstrated the connection between freshly harvested vegetables and the foods they eat, and explained the riddle of the mouth-watering produce: "The vegetables taste better because you saw where they grew, picked them, and ate them fresh," she said.

Teiyara, 10, is inspired: "When I go home, I want to start a garden," she said. "Maybe I'll plant raspberries like the ones they have here, and I'll give them to my mother."

MEET THE ANIMALS

Titan, a milking Devon cow, basked in the sun, patiently tolerating the many little hands gently rubbing her stubby hair.

Though most of the campers have been to the zoo, for many it's the first time they've seen farm animals — which local farmers lend for the summer — including pigs, goats and surprisingly-large cows. Harmony, 12, looked skeptical as her friends inched toward Titan. "It's so big, bigger than a giant," she declared. Eventually, curiosity got the best of her, and she gingerly rubbed Titan's soft flank. The cow threw her a look and heaved a sigh. "She's softer than I thought," she said. "You like that, cow?"

Ayana, 12, even made friends with some slimy creatures. "I got to collect earthworms and I named them," she beamed. Even the bugs excited Eve, 9. "They are really cool," she said, examining a pink katydid in a magnifying insect jar.

"The kids leave with a better connection to the land," Nicki said. "They learn about the whole process of where their food comes from."

FINDING THEIR GROOVE

At Camp ABC, girls have lots of adventures: they hike, try archery, paddle from one end of the lake to another. And then there's a different kind of adventure: learning to play an instrument.

For over 25 years, The Fresh Air Fund has partnered with The ASCAP Foundation to provide musical education to thousands of campers. Through guitar lessons, girls develop skills that often take them to a lifelong devotion to music. And while most campers start with little to no experience, they leave feeling like rock stars.

Beginning with "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and working up to the latest pop songs, many of the kids catch on fast. "I learned to play a whole song in one session," said Ayana. "I can't wait to learn another one. I feel like an artist, very creative."

Instructor and musician Tom Simmons, who has worked with ASCAP for 10 years, said he encourages students to go at their own pace. "Being comfortable is the most important thing," he said. "I make sure nobody gets left behind."

Musical education goes beyond music — studying instruments fosters creativity, self-expression, and a powerful feeling of accomplishment.

"Music is therapeutic," said Simmons. "Knowing that they can learn to play the guitar will help them know that they can accomplish other things. I hope they feel empowered."

BECOMING LEADERS

What makes a leader? Inclusion. Empowerment. Mentors and role models. And Camp ABC provides it all.

Even as children, ABC campers recognize the effects of camp, of the community, and the support. Said Allana, 12: "The people around me, like my counselors, they all helped me boost up my confidence so now I can say, 'I am strong. I can do anything.'"

Then there are the structured programs geared to create female leaders. Camp ABC's Leaders-in-Training program, for 13- to 15-year-olds, and the Counselor-in-Training (CIT) program, for 16- and 17-year-olds, focus on personal growth and leadership, helping girls develop self-confidence and discover their potential.

Kailey, 16, is spending her first summer as a CIT. "I love the friends I have made here, we build each other up," she said. "Hiking and team-building activities give us all a sense of accomplishment. I'm excited to be the role model for my campers that my counselors were for me."

Ten-year-old Becky tried to be brave as she waved goodbye to her parents and younger brother, boarding the bus that would take her to camp in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley. "At first, I was so nervous, but then I became more and more excited," remembered Becky, now 23. "Then, when I got there, it was just so magical."

"There" was Camp ABC, where Becky spent the next seven summers. Throughout every school year, she couldn't wait to go back — to her friends, the counselors, the trees, the lake, the endless activities and the deep quiet. "At camp, every day, every hour was something new, something fun," she said. "And at night, I got the best sleep of my life."

In her summer world, Becky felt like she was part of something bigger, connecting in a whole new way to those around her. Shy and reserved at school, at camp she began to let down her guard, singing silly songs with her friends, eventually becoming a leader among them. Camp ABC helped her overcome her own insecurities and access her leadership abilities.

Every summer she became stronger, growing into herself through swimming in the lake, playing sports, learning guitar and hiking wooded trails. Camp was a much-needed break from the city and the classroom, renewing her energy for the next school year.

“At camp, every day, every hour was something new, something fun.”

BECKY
FRESH AIR FUND ALUM



COUNTDOWN TO SUMMER

For thousands of children from New York City's underserved communities, participating in a Fresh Air summer program is the start of an amazing journey full of new experiences and adventures. Thanks to many generous partners and supporters, Fresh Air children discover a world full of expanded opportunities and new possibilities.

The Fresh Air Fund's "Countdown to Summer" has begun! Learn more at FreshAir.org.

BECAUSE A SUMMER CAN LAST A LIFETIME

Since its founding in 1877, The Fresh Air Fund, an independent, not-for-profit organization, has provided free life-changing summer experiences in the outdoors to more than 1.8 million children from New York City's underserved communities.

At sleepaway camps in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley, visiting volunteer host families along the East Coast, and in NYC-based programs, children learn new skills, have fun and gain new perspectives. Youth also participate in year-round leadership, career exploration and educational programs. Learn more at FreshAir.org.



THE DYNAMIC DUO: FRESH AIR FUND SISTERS

As the older sister, Emmericia, 22, was used to going first. And camp was no different. At age 9 she spent her first summer at Camp ABC, followed a year later by her younger sister, Eyanna. As they each experienced their own unique camp journey, they also grew closer, sharing a bond that only camp can bring.

EMMERICIA

At school, Emmericia was a quiet child, staying mostly to herself. At home, she was busy with her other siblings. At camp, she had the chance to be herself. "I could be a kid, and I loved it," she said.

Emmericia loved the space, swimming, and especially bonding. Indeed, it's the connection to the other girls, and the fact that ABC is girls-only, that made it so special. "We all learned to love and accept each other, to be there for each other, and to have each other's back," she said.

One of the ways the girls bonded was through making up songs, putting in hours of rehearsal before the final performance at the camp-wide talent show. "Even the girls who didn't really like to sing got into it, and everyone got so excited," she said. "It really brought us together."

Together they experienced nature, live and up close – the bugs, the darkness at night, the intense quiet. The cicadas, which made their appearance her first year at camp, orchestrating the soundtrack of their summer, were both creepy and cool, something she'll always remember.

At 15, Emmericia earned her first paycheck at Camp ABC, a stipend through the Teen Leadership program, a milestone she showed off to family and friends.

Fast forward: Emmericia returned to camp with a big responsibility: a village leader in charge of counselors and campers. And she proudly rose to the occasion. "Camp ABC has helped me develop my natural born leadership skills," she said. "Working at camp is hard work but fun; so fun it makes you want to put in your all."

As a counselor, Emmericia sees herself through her campers' eyes, remembering how she felt at their age, when the older girls and the counselors had

celebrity status. "We wanted to be like them," she said. "We watched how much they took care of each other, and how much they loved their jobs."

And she's taken the peace that she discovered at camp and brought it with her back to Brooklyn. "If I'm stressed, no matter where I am, I just go look at the trees, or up at the sky," she said. "Just looking at nature calms me down."

Emmericia has stayed involved with The Fresh Air Fund during the school year, as an advisor for the Young Women's Giving Circle, she mentors teenage girls, guiding them as they learn about philanthropy and community service.

After completing her degree from Monroe College, Emmericia will start a social work program in the fall. Emmericia has always loved helping others, and her career goal – to open a post-high school center for youth who are neurodivergent – builds on her current work with young adults who are autistic.

Having her sister, Eyanna, at camp – especially when they were younger – brought them closer.

"Of course, we always had a lot in common, but camp gave us something special," she said. "We both know what it means to be part of The Fresh Air Fund."

EYANNA

For Eyanna, 21, her camp experience – which began at age 9 – started her on a journey that has had a long-term effect, both physically and emotionally.

She came to camp overweight and self-conscious. She had already endured bullying about her size and was uncomfortable in her body, but did not have the understanding, strength or tools to do anything about it.

At camp she had fun being active, swimming in the lake, playing soccer and hiking. And most of all, she felt seen and accepted. "No one teased me

or told me to lose weight," she said. "At home I was always seeing skinny people in magazines, but at camp I didn't feel so much pressure, and I didn't feel like an outsider."

Every summer she became more aware and focused on developing positive eating and exercise habits, eventually joining her high school's track team, working out at the gym regularly and sticking to a food plan – habits that have stayed with her. "I didn't know it at the time, but I was eating compulsively," she said. "Camp gave me the acceptance, strength and tools to change that."

A few years later Eyanna became a counselor, and found herself coaching her campers through their own adjustment period. She recognizes the importance of creating a positive atmosphere, no matter how she may be feeling. "Especially with teenagers, I have to be very patient, and realize that my mood affects the girls," she said.

As a counselor, Eyanna also replicates some of her favorite aspects of camp, such as the constant chants; some old favorites, some made from remixes of the latest hits. Every girl gets the chance to join in and add her part. "Chants help them feel like they're all in it together, get their energy up, and when they hear their verse, it makes them even more excited."

A practicing cosmetologist, Eyanna is graduating this year from the Borough of Manhattan Community College with a degree in business management. She hopes to put her two loves together: beauty and business.

Another unexpected camp perk are the international friends she's made, counselors from countries ranging from Mexico and Hungary to Poland and Scotland. In July, Eyanna is heading to London to meet one of her British friends. "The world has become a lot smaller since I've been part of The Fresh Air Fund."



FROM THE BRONX TO BUSINESS: A TRANSFORMATIVE SUMMER JOURNEY

In the six years he spent visiting the Heath family through The Fund's Friendly Towns program, 20-year-old Qadir experienced all kinds of things he never would have imagined back at home in the Bronx: Camping. Water tubing. Sports camp, clown camp, engineering camp. And he discovered that, not only does he have many talents, he's also great with people.

As soon as 10-year-old Qadir stepped off the bus in Greenwich, Conn., he felt right at home. Within minutes he was shooting hoops with host father Larry Heath, and playing catch and bonding over video games with host brother Charles, who is two years older than him.

For the next several years Qadir not only came to Greenwich every summer, he often visited throughout the year. And every year he grew more confident and comfortable. A fledgling swimmer, lessons helped improve his skills quickly – and then he never wanted to dry off. He loves rewatching a video of himself at age 12, completing a full lap and smiling ear to ear. "I was just so proud of myself, it was such an accomplishment," he said. The Heaths took him to a lake, where they fished, boated, and even wakeboarded. He and his host siblings rode bikes endlessly around the neighborhood. He made friends with virtually everyone he met.

Each summer the Heaths enrolled him in a camp – one year a sports camp, one year a clown camp, and – the one that really made a difference in his life – engineering camp. "My aunts always told me that I had a natural talent for figuring out how things worked, and engineering camp helped me really get it," he said. Qadir just completed his first year as an electrical engineering student at CUNY's New York City College of Technology, and credits the Heaths with helping him get there.

Although Qadir always planned to go to college, the application process was daunting. Host mother Nicole Heath was there to guide him through it. "Nicole 100 percent pushed me to go further than I might have otherwise," he



said. "I don't think I would have been on track to go to college without her." She also encouraged Qadir to email her once a week, to help improve his writing skills. "They wanted to make sure that I was always successful, and still do so much to support me to this day."

Today Qadir attributes his worldly perspective, love of the outdoors and appreciation for travel to his experiences with The Fund; he's just booked a cruise to Mexico, Honduras and Belize. Always a people person, he's become a true extrovert. "The Fresh Air Fund helped my real personality come out," he said. And because, every summer, he was always meeting new people, going to new camps, and visiting new places, he learned to be adaptable, to push past

any lingering shyness. "I know how to start conversations when I meet new people, to be expressive, to approach people without fear, and to be friendly to everyone," he said. It's a trait that has come in handy during his long-time job, as head usher at the renowned Apollo Theater, a job that requires excellent communication skills. He's also a member of The Fresh Air Fund Alumni Advisory Board, a volunteer group that helps inform and shape programming.

Qadir has big plans. He's considering changing his major to business administration, so he can potentially create his own company. He's confident about his future, his abilities, and the support he knows he'll always have.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: Emmericia's experience as a counselor with The Fresh Air Fund inspired her to study social work.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: As a camp counselor for young girls, Eyanna focuses on creating a positive atmosphere.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Campers are all smiles when spending time with friends.

ABOVE: Qadir and his host mother Nicole reunited at the Annual Friendly Towns Conference for volunteer leaders.

LEFT: Qadir spent six summers visiting the Heath family in Greenwich, Conn.

BELOW LEFT: A counselor teaches campers new card games.

BELOW RIGHT: A camper strums away during his guitar lesson at Camp Junior.

SUMMER CAMP ADVENTURES

At overnight camps in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley, children ages 8-16 hike wooded trails and learn about the environment while exploring the outdoors. Camp activities include swimming lessons, sports, boating, art and music classes, and activities that focus on leadership development, STEM and more. They return home with more confidence, new skills and new friends. In a typical summer, more than 3,000 children attend Fresh Air summer camps.

Five of The Fund's sleepaway camps are located on Sharpe Reservation, a more than 2,000-acre property with nature trails, lakes and streams, a Model Farm and planetarium, in Fishkill, NY. The Fund's sixth camp, Camp Junior in Harriman State Park, is for children ages 8-15 from the Bronx and is named in memory of Lesandro "Junior" Guzman-Feliz, a victim of gang violence.

STAYING CONNECTED

The Fund's year-round enrichment programs maintain connections and provide ongoing support. The tutoring program matches students one-on-one with volunteers who help with academic skill building and serve as trusted role models. The College Connections Program provides guidance, resources and ongoing support for students as they apply to college and explore a full range of post-secondary options.

The Young Women's Giving Circle (YWGC) is a youth-led program that teaches young women about the importance of community service and the power of philanthropy. The Circle of Brotherhood program provides young men with a safe and supportive space to discuss issues related to healthy manhood. Camp Junior participants, youth ages 8-15 from the Bronx, engage in year-round activities including a running club, self-defense and leadership workshops and service projects.





CAMP MARIAH CITs: GUIDING AND GROWING

Growing up is full of twists, turns and bumps in the road. Wouldn't it be nice to have some training? The Fresh Air Fund's CIT (counselor-in-training) program is about as close as it gets — a transition from being a kick-ball-playing kid to a bill-paying grownup. As they progress from camper to CIT, Camp Mariah "graduates" get closer to adulting, growing through the act of giving back, honing their confidence, self-awareness, and communication skills.

Based on the positive relationship she had had with her own counselor, Kaylee, 16, was excited to become a CIT. She remembers her first summer as a camper, arriving from Brooklyn: when she was homesick, afraid of the dark and whatever lurked in the outdoors, it was her counselor who got her through it. "She was accepting and encouraging, pushing me just enough to face my fears," Kaylee said. That first summer, Kaylee's big breakthroughs included sleeping outside, in a tent, during an overnight, braving the elements and the bugs; performing karaoke; and dancing with abandon with her newfound friends. "I was so shy, but at camp, I felt a freedom I never had before."

Many of the CITs are not much older than the campers. This can present challenges, as well as distinct advantages. "It's easier for them to connect with me, and me with them," she said. "They tell me things they might not tell anyone else, because I'm like a big sister. I can also relate because I've gone through some of those things not so long ago. I know exactly what it's like to be adjusting to all the new people and activities at camp."

Kaylee encourages the campers to open up, join the games, shout the cheers. And just as, by the end of her first summer as a camper, she didn't want to leave, she finds her campers feel the same way. "My life really changed, and it's great to watch that happen to other young girls."

Whether as a camper or CIT, Kaylee never tires of returning to camp. "It's so peaceful, to look up and see the stars," she said. "As soon as I step off the bus, I feel different than I do in the city. I feel relaxed."

Before becoming a CIT, Ibraheem, 17, was part of nearly every program

The Fund offers, from two summers at Camp Mariah to the Teen Academy's coding program during the pandemic, plus year-round tutoring, mentoring, college fairs and SAT-prep through the College Connections Program. Now a high school senior, he's heading to Syracuse University in the fall with a goal of majoring in computer science. He attributes The Fund's many enrichment programs with getting him to this point. "They walked me through the college application process, including financial aid, which I wouldn't have known how to do on my own," he said.

Ibraheem was ready for the responsibility of being a CIT. But before he had a chance to work with the kids, there were the weekend workshops with the other CITs, which had unexpected benefits. "I really got to know them, we developed a special bond and became very close," he said. And Ibraheem discovered a hidden, and surprising, superpower — kids love him. "I hadn't ever worked with kids before, but I made sure to get to know them and let them get to know me," he said. He balanced being a friend and a role model. "I have to be understanding, but also focused and lead by example."

Ibraheem is planning to become a counselor next year, another big step. "I'm preparing mentally," he said. His biggest takeaway is the need to go with the flow, to recognize that many things don't go according to plan, and that's okay. It's a lesson he tries to give to the kids, too. "I hope they come away from the summer bonding with new people, more open to the world, and ready for what life brings them."

Joannie, 17, a former camper at both Camp ABC and Camp Mariah, sorely missed in-person camp during the pandemic. "When I was younger, I was very shy, and camp really helped me get

out of my shell," she said. "But during Covid, I became more nervous and unsure of myself again." As soon as she met her fellow CITs, she felt her confidence grow and she began to feel like "herself" again. The girls were from across the city, but they connected easily — they all had camp in common.

As the weeks passed, Joannie lost even more of her self-consciousness, finally relaxing back into the person she had been pre-Covid. "I really bonded with the girls, and I got out of my own head," she said. "Being a CIT and working with the kids brought back my more extroverted side, and is also the perfect transition between camper and counselor — a taste of responsibility, but not all of it."

For Joannie, returning to camp has been therapeutic on many levels. "When I finally came back after the pandemic, I got super emotional," she said. "In the city, everything is always moving so fast, at camp time slows down, I can breathe easier, and be more present with others. I have deeper connections at camp."

Shane, 16, has always loved the stress-free aspect of camp, a feeling he hopes to pass on to the campers. "I just want them to have a good time, and come away with good summer memories," he said. Shane was inspired to become a CIT and work toward being a counselor by his own counselors, who he grew very close to. Shane credits the Career Awareness Program with helping him create realistic goals. Once hoping to become a professional athlete, he now hopes to work in sports finance or sports programming.

The campers get attached to their counselors and their CITs, and it can be hard to say goodbye. "I miss my campers," Shane said. "I think about them, and I hope to see them again next summer. Camp really is like a family that just keeps growing."

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES, BUILDING FAMILY

Vasaune was just 6-years-old when he headed to Maplewood, NJ, for the first time, nervous yet giddy with excitement. Stepping off the bus and into the bright August sun, he was met with a big sparkly sign proclaiming: "Welcome Vasaune!" and the equally big smiles of his host family. Later that day, as Vasaune, Danielle and Scott Walsman, and their three young boys walked downtown for ice cream, Vasaune looked at the passing trees and quaint shops, and had a feeling: This will be okay. No, better than okay. This will be great.

His intuition proved correct. Twelve years later, Vasaune, now a poised 18-year-old, reflects on the transformative journey from the busy streets of Brownsville, N.Y. to the leafy tranquility of Maplewood, the many new experiences — swimming in a lake, tubing, camping, skiing — and the second family he found. "From the first time I arrived, they made me feel at home," he recalled.

Host mother Danielle, a New Jersey native, had been waiting for her chance to host a child since high school, when she saw a simple ad seeking host families for The Fresh Air Fund. "I was just a teenager, but I thought, 'when I have a family, I'm going to do that.'"

Danielle's three sons — William 19, Riley, 17 and Murphy, 14 — have grown up with Vasaune, who often visits during the school year as well as the summer — and they truly consider him part of the family. He gets along with all the boys, though they each have a different relationship — like brothers do.

"I've always looked forward to him coming," said William, a freshman at Penn State. "Even though we have different backgrounds, we're more similar than different." The boys bond over basketball, playing countless games of pickup over the years. "I learned a lot from him. He's fearless, and it makes me feel like if he can go out of his comfort zone, so can I."

For Riley, Vasaune is more than just a brother; he's a unifying force in the

family. "When he's here, we're more together, playing games when usually we'd all just be off doing our own thing." Murphy admires Vasaune's bravery and openness, noting, "He's changed my perspective, showing me we're not that different despite our backgrounds. He encourages me to be open and friendly with everyone. It's cool hanging out with him."

Every summer (and sometimes in between), as soon as Vasaune arrived, host father Scott Walsman cooks him his favorite meal (steak and mashed potatoes), and then the fun, and feats of daring, begin. One summer he took piano lessons, another karate lessons — it just so happened the karate studio owner was a Fresh Air Fund alum. It became a tradition that each summer he tried a new food — one summer it was asparagus, another, avocado.

During Maplewood's annual Fourth of July party, when the family woke up early and suited up for the town's annual 5K run, Vasaune joined right in. Although he initially wondered, "Why are we doing this?" he found joy in the challenge, even winning his age group. Subsequent Fourth of July experiences included barbecues and fireworks — and, cheered on by the whole town, the 5K every year.

Vasaune, who was afraid of the water when he first arrived in Maplewood, began taking swimming lessons at the local pool. Earning his deep-water certificate was another milestone, celebrated

by the whole family. "That was such an exciting day," remembered Danielle. "Since we've known him, he went from not swimming to going off the 10-meter dive. We were so proud of him, it was awesome." Since then, Vasaune has helped teach his friends back home how to swim.

Vasaune's initial skepticism toward a proposed hike in the woods was validated when a misstep led to an unexpected sting, prompting his memorable exclamation, "nature bit me!" Despite this rough introduction, Vasaune's relationship with the outdoors transformed. Embracing the tranquility of camping, the thrill of fishing, and the serene beauty of nature's quiet, he found a new passion. "I love being outdoors now, it's so calming," he said.

Danielle acknowledges a deep reciprocity in The Fresh Air Fund experience. "Hosting Vasaune is one of the most meaningful things our family has ever done," she said. "Forging a long-term relationship over many years is what has been so special for us."

Last summer, Danielle asked Vasaune if he wanted to bring one of his brothers for the weekend — instead he brought his mother, Cindy Pricer — herself a Fresh Air Fund participant when she was a child. Visiting the Walsmans with her was deeply significant for Vasaune, bridging Fresh Air Fund past and present. "Having my mom with me, to experience it together, just brought us even closer." ✨

FRIENDLY TOWNS

The Friendly Towns program, created in 1877, provides children ages 8–18 with the opportunity to visit volunteer host families for one-to-two weeks over the summer in rural and suburban communities along the East Coast. Many children return for extended visits with the same host families year after year, creating lifelong connections and gaining new perspectives. A visit to stay with a host family is full of fun experiences like riding bicycles, making s'mores, playing in the backyard, catching fireflies, swimming and making new friends! Every host family goes through a rigorous screening process including a home visit, interview, references and a background check. Make a difference this summer and volunteer as a host family. Learn more at FreshAir.org.

ABOVE: Shane, Noah, Ibraheem and Brian participated in the Counselor-in-Training program at Camp Mariah.

BELOW LEFT: A camper practices his free throw at Camp Junior.

BELOW RIGHT: (From left to right) Angelina, Kaylee, Joannie and Jocelyn participated in the Counselor-in-Training program at Camp Mariah.

OPPOSITE, TOP: Vasaune visits the Walsman family, in Maplewood, NJ, every summer through The Fund's Friendly Towns program.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: Vasaune has been visiting the Walsman family since he was 6-years-old.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT: A camper climbs to new heights at the high ropes course.



Image: Adam Terry



Image: Jenna Bascom

A photograph of three young girls smiling in a forest. The girl on the left is wearing a purple hoodie. The girl in the middle is wearing a green shirt and holding a green water bottle. The girl on the right is wearing a red hoodie and has braces. They are standing in front of a dense forest of green trees.

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