

A Counselor's Story

In July, over 50 children attended Camp Erin, our three-night, four-day summer camp for children and teens who have experienced the death of a loved one. Michael Ranieri, one of this year's camp counselors, shares his story...

I was in the middle of an episode of "Lost" when a commercial for Camp Erin came on. I instantly knew I wanted to sign up to be a counselor.

I had watched my father die in 2006 and knew exactly how it felt to experience the death of someone important. I understood the emotions that accompany a death, and I felt I could relate to the campers because I had struggled with anger and sadness for quite some time.

When cancer got the best of my dad, I was a senior in high school. I didn't have a group I could rely on, and I felt all alone in my own world. My friends were supportive, but they couldn't relate to my situation. Overwhelmed by our grief, my siblings and I felt we were from Mars and everyone else that we knew was from Venus. Yet even with our shared sense of sadness at home, we were uncomfortable talking about death. Years later, even now as a senior in college, I am still struggling with my grief.

I served as a counselor at Camp Erin from July 8-11, 2010, and found a place that was comforting, even for me. It felt like home. There seemed to be a connection among all of the campers,

counselors, and staff. Everyone was a friend, and where there were tears, there also were hugs. From what I saw, this place was exactly what the kids needed – a safe place and a supportive environment that offered hope and some reassurance that maybe things would turn out alright in the end.

I was assigned to work with children ages 6 to 11 at camp. The weekend took an emotional toll on my heart. These kids had been through hell...diseases, homicides, suicide, accidents...it



Pictured, left to right: Ari Delgado, camper; Michael Ranieri, counselor; Jordan Keller, camper. Photo credit: Nick Heinz.

seemed like there was no end to the sadness. Every child and teenager was dealing with a harsh reality, and I felt responsible for helping them understand that they would get through their grief.

I'm not usually an emotional person, but Camp Erin brought that out in me. After my time at camp, I felt more connected with my father than I have in a long time. Time has a way of making the memories fade, but I learned that

we actually need to think about our loved ones to heal.

I had the opportunity to talk with almost every one of the campers. I listened to their stories and felt their strength. We had so many emotional bridges to cross during Camp Erin: we honored our loved ones with drumming, threw flowers into the lake during a memorial service, wrote in journals and drew pictures. It was an amazing experience. I truly had a chance to feel what everyone was going through, and they had a chance to step into my shoes.

I'm a different person after four days at Camp Erin. It changed my life, and I know it changed some of the camper's lives, as well. When I tell my friends about it, how a grief camp was one of the best experiences of my life, most don't understand how this is possible. I'm sure they wonder how something so sad could be so helpful.

I don't have all the answers, but I'm already counting down the days until next year.

Michael Ranieri is a senior at Aurora University majoring in Journalism.

During his time at Camp Erin, he became affectionately known as "The Pied Piper" because the campers felt such a connection to him and followed him everywhere.