



Gone to camp

Susan Lightstone

Five white basins are lined up on the floor, a wounded foot soaking in each one. The 5 young boys to whom the feet belong sit on a wooden bench comparing “war” stories (“We were portaging for hours and when I took my shoes off, I had this huge blister on my toe. Man, it’s so gross!”). They barely notice when the doctor enters the cabin. He checks out the 5 feet, then joins in the boys’ conversation during the 30-minute soaking process. They talk about sailing, pillow fights, tennis matches, mud wrestling and camp fires. This is Dr. Chaim Shustik’s afternoon clinic on Aug. 3, 1999.

For the past decade, Shustik has gone to camp each summer. He’s spent up to a month as the doctor at Camp Nominiguc, a boys’ camp in Quebec’s Laurentians, 200 km north of Montreal. His 6-bed hospital is a tidy, circa 1930 cabin. The screen door opens onto a stand of white birches.

This past summer he was on duty for only 10 days in August. The sons who originally prompted his camp career are grown and working in the city for the summer, and his eldest starts medical school at McGill this fall. “When my children were of the age to go to camp, I was envious,” Shustik explains. “I grew up going to Camp Northland in Ontario. I loved everything about the experience, from swimming in cold water to canoeing to summer romances.” So when a friend who was Nominiguc’s longtime doctor told him he was giving up the gig, Shustik, together with his wife, Ilsa, and children Jesse, Ellen and David, decided to try camp life. The boys enrolled in the camp program.

That move has taken on profound significance in Shustik’s life. “There are no decisions about where to eat, how to dress,” he says. “I can clear my head of everything but what I’m going to read. My only worry is who I’ll play tennis with. This place makes you feel young again and it takes me away from the serious business I’m involved in. My work here has no relation to the rest of my professional life and that’s what I like about it.”

In the real world, Shustik is a hematologist at Montreal’s Royal Victoria Hospital and an associate professor at McGill. His practice focuses on hematologic cancers, and he chairs the Myeloma Study for the National Cancer Institute of Canada. His summer stints allow him the luxury of time — time to sail, swim, canoe, rest and, most important, read lengthy books such as *Moby Dick*.

There are medical challenges, too. “Before the summer, I ask my colleagues what the latest antibiotics are and whether there are any new treatments for otitis media.” Over the course of a camp, he’ll see ear infections aplenty, sore throats, lots of cuts, some asthma, fish hooks in thumbs and perhaps a couple of broken bones. “I spent a year as a neurosurgeon and I get a real kick out of sutures,” he chuckles.

But things can get serious — once, 2 counsellors were thrown and knocked out when the tent pole they were holding was struck by lightning. They experienced no immediate physical problems, but the next day Shustik was told that one of the boys was having a seizure. In fact, the experience had simply frightened him so much he was hyperventilating. “I used the

paper-bag trick. The kids were so impressed.”

Shustik has impressed many kids over the years, including a counsellor who recently learned he had idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura. Knowing that a doctor was on staff, the young man was able to take up his duties as a counsellor. “I saw him every day and much of his advice was dispensed on the tennis court,” the counsellor says. “It was like having a doctor in my backyard. I was stressed, and he explained everything that was going on — the different drugs and their pros and cons. It was really reassuring.”

Talking to these young campers and counsellors — and watching them grow — might be the best part of camp experience for Shustik. “Each year they add an inch or two and they grow from little pipsqueaks into regular folk. I, on the other hand, return to the complete freedom of childhood.” ?



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Dr. Chaim Shustik helps camper Sean Garland