

## The Gift

August 22nd, 2006 by [Deanna Mackey](#)

I was given a gift this month. It was the best kind because it was unexpected and its impact continues to influence me as the days pass since I received it. The gift was a week of uninterrupted time to learn more about my kids and young people in general. And it was a gift I didn't even know I wanted.

I spent a week volunteering at a Girl Scout day camp, leading a group of pre-teen (tween) girls dubbed "Technology Goddesses" who wanted to learn about the Internet, computers and expressing themselves in a digital world. My oldest daughter was in my group and my son joined the boy's unit, created for the leaders' sons.

What I expected was to be exhausted, challenged and possibly in over my head. What I didn't expect was the joy of watching these girls learn and learning from them, becoming a team and enjoying the innocent pleasures that summer camp offers.

As a working mother, I usually see camp as the oasis in a summer of free time that needs to be filled with safe, fun activities. Being on the other side, as a camp leader, gave me a different perspective. I discovered that adults get as much or more out of going to camp as the children. I discovered there are things I don't know about my kids that were revealed when I spent five days in a row watching them interact with other adults and children. I was reminded that the hallmarks of good leadership work as well when you're empowering young girls as when you're mentoring adults.

To be honest, I was nervous about my mission. Although I have three children and have volunteered with kids for years, I saw this role as different because for a week I would be in charge of the health, well being and entertainment of eight tweens, by myself. I repeat, by myself. OK, there was an incredible, inspiring camp director; her amazing co-leader; a techie computer lab lady; a craft czarina; and many other high-energy, soul-nurturing women leaders. But, I still had to keep my eight girls happy, inspired and safe from the time we got on the bus at 7:30 in the morning to the time I turned them over to their parents each evening. This made me nervous because I'm not the type of mom who welcomes a Suburban full of girls to the house for sleepovers every Friday night. My comfort level is more on the one-on-one or maybe one-on-two or three ratio of adults to kids. I'm a consistent, generally nice, fair mom. Even my own high-maintenance tween agrees with my assessment. But, I'm not what I would call a "cool" mom, one of those types who says, "Yes" every time my child wants a friend over and keeps a cupboard full of treats for large crowds of kids. I'm not very artsy and believe craft kits are like manna from heaven and it would be generous to say my outdoors skills are adequate. There's a reason I carry Hilton and Hyatt frequent guest cards.

So, I wasn't sure how my personality would fit with the expectations of a group of seasoned Girl Scout campers. What I had to offer was a love of technology, strong leadership skills and a passion to encourage girls. After a week, I realized that was more than enough. What I didn't know, they were more than willing to teach me. This included the proper steps for raising a flag to showing me how to take down my tent. I watched and guided them through the awkwardness of making instant friends. Accustomed to my own daughter, whose intense, creative personality often finds her leading the pack, I was touched by the gentle nature of many of the girls. Their acceptance of their differences and willingness to help me and each other was uplifting. I found there was an art to encouraging the shy ones to speak up or raise their hand for a plum camp job, but what took coaxing on the first day became a habit for them by the last. Watching each of their gifts emerge as they became more comfortable with each other reminded me of the caterpillar becoming the butterfly. Where one created a detailed camp scrapbook with beautiful layered papers, another delighted in every roly poly and spider in the camp. Their power point presentations expressed their individual interests and command of technology and included obscure images, digital photography, music, sound and effects.

They embraced teamwork and when their craft-challenged leader inspired them to vie for the camp

poster award they couldn't work fast enough. Their creativity, determination and attention to detail were inspiring. When we won I thought I couldn't be happier. When they worked together to share the prizes equally, I knew I'd done my job.

In a world where Mean Girls and Material Girls make headlines, these girls on the brink of becoming women gave me hope. When adult behavior often makes me pause and wonder why so many men and women find simple kindness and respect so hard to show, I can recall this time when I witnessed their generosity of spirit on a daily basis. When a girl was sad, they were comforting; when a girl marched to the beat of a different drummer, they had patience. When they had to take turns at being in charge, they were gracious. I want to believe that girls supporting girls can become women empowering women.

Being a camp leader showed me it can happen if you're willing to give yourself the gift of sharing yourself.