

Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp

by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

Labels can be misleading. If her 18 years on Earth have taught Aubree Morris anything, it's just that.

The first lesson came at 9 years old when her father, Jerry, received a canister of kerosene from a friend who was remodeling a home. At least, kerosene is how the jug was labeled and what both the friend and Aubree's father were led to believe comprised its contents.

One spring day, Jerry Morris asked his youngest daughter if she wanted to help burn brush at their home on Mountain Valley Road in Rockingham County. Her job was to light the pile that was soaked in kerosene. However, it turned out the liquid was gasoline, which brought a painful way to learn that labels cannot always be trusted.

"The flame knocked me back and burned the top and front half of my body," Aubree said. "I had first-, second- and third-degree burns."

For the next two months, her chest and arms had to be wrapped, and plenty of

ointment applied to her face. Aubree couldn't bend her arms and struggled to write.

"I hated taking baths," she said. "That was the worst."

But being viewed as a "burn victim" brings scars deeper than the surface of the skin. A fourth-grade student at the time, Aubree faced a lot of teasing at the hands of her elementary peers.

"It was hard," she said, "but I never missed a day."

From there, the second lesson about misleading labels is derived: It's not how people tag you — "burn victim," or anything else — but how you portray yourself in your own skin that matters most.

In the aftermath of her burn incident, Aubree found a way to be herself, label free, thanks to a local program called the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp.

"Being burned isn't a curse. It's kind of a blessing in disguise," she said. "[At camp], you can find such a beautiful community of people who have had just the same experiences as you. The people are so

loving and kind. You can be yourself. They still love you no matter what."

Milestone Year

Celebrating its 30th year, the burn camp hosts survivors ages 7 through 17 from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and Washington, D.C., for a week of activities at Brethren Woods Camp and Retreat Center in Rockingham County. There's no expense to campers.

The camp's directors, Linda French and Tonas Kalil of Clarksville, Maryland, were physical therapists at the Baltimore Regional Burn Center when, in 1988, they began planning a burn camp fashioned after a similar one in Denver, according to the camp's website. The location of the camp varied until a permanent move to Rockingham County in 1992, when French and Kalil also established Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp Inc., a nonprofit that supports outreach to burn units, young survivors and their families throughout the region.

Aubree Morris

Campers enjoy various activities during the 30th annual Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp at Brethren Woods Camp and Retreat Center in Rockingham County. This year's camp had 54 attendees and ran from July 29 through Aug. 4.



The 30th camp was recently held July 29 through Aug. 4. It had 54 campers with 45 counselors.

“Burn camp is a great support group,” Kalil said during a break on the second day of camp. “It allows the kids a chance to get together with other people who share their experiences, the same scars, in a safe, informal environment.”

Lt. Erin Stehle, public education officer for the Harrisonburg Fire Department, is one of the camp counselors and considers the event “by far” the best activity associated with her job.

“Being in prevention is so important and being surrounded by burn survivors all week re-energizes me so that I can come back to work and hopefully continue to prevent burn injuries,” she said. “Being a counselor is so fulfilling and the burn survivors teach



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me so much about life and remind me how to appreciate the small things.”

Burn camp is more than its name suggests. Kalil said among the counselors this year were a social worker and psychologist because, for many kids, their burn injuries are not necessarily the biggest issue.

Aubree Morris was among the campers this year, and one of only a handful from the Shenandoah Valley. She actually lives within about 3 miles of Brethren Woods, but Aubree’s mother, Sandy, learned of the camp from a friend.

At 10 years old — the summer after her brush fire incident — Aubree enrolled.

“When I first went, I said that I’d go for the day and come home. I ended up staying the whole week,” she said. “I’ve made some of the best friends there. It’s a different experience for all of us. We bond and see how we’ve all persevered, showing that we can get through it to become successful.”

SVEC Scholarship Winner

Sandy Morris said her daughter’s burn injuries could have been much worse, but fortunately, when the incident occurred, Aubree was wet from playing in a sprinkler. While her scars have mostly healed in the nine years since, she admits she’s still not comfortable around fires or ovens.

This year was the last year Aubree was eligible to attend the camp since she turned 18 at the end of August. She is now a student at Frostburg State University in Maryland, pursuing a career in nursing while also participating on the swim team.

Aubree is also one of 10 graduating high school seniors in 2018 who earned a \$1,000 college scholarship from Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative. In her essay to the scholarship committee, she said she hopes to one day work at Sentara RMH Medical Center.

“I want to work in a place that helped me through my burns and other injuries as a child, so I can make the same impact that my nurses made on me,” Aubree wrote. “If a child or adult comes in, I want to inspire them to become whatever they want and know that just because life has setbacks, it does not mean you can’t achieve and overcome anything in the world.”

It’s that type of attitude that makes her a prime candidate to return to burn camp as a counselor in the future. She’s more than ready to teach others the importance of living a label-free life.

“I love watching the younger kids. I’ve seen kids grow up and they come off the bus the next year and they’re taller than me,” Aubree said. “I know that I’ll end up back there some day.”

For more information about the camp, please visit midatlanticburncamp.org.