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With Sleepaway Camp, Trying to Keep Stability

By Thomas Gaffney



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Shari Robeck and her children, Sebastian and Brianna, have struggled since Ms. Robeck lost her job and her marriage ended.

Chocolate and s'mores. For Brianna Robeck, these are among her favorite things about camp. She spent the summer at Camp Louemma in Sussex, N.J., and spoke excitedly about her time there.

"There's this cantor that comes, like, every year," she said. "He teaches us how to make chocolate, and then we put chocolate in molds."

Brianna, 10, and her brother, Sebastian Robeck, 13, are veterans of summer sleepaways — she since age 6, he for the past five summers. The young campers are familiar with the rituals and traditions: s'mores roasts and the inevitable attack of homesickness. But the Robeck children know a different kind of yearning for home. They and their mother, Shari Robeck, 52, have been homeless for years, and are staying in a shelter in Harlem.

Until Ms. Robeck lost her job in 2007, she had been a saleswoman for a natural-gas company in Orange, N.J. She earned \$60,000 a year, drove a company car and had a home in the Ridgewood section of Queens. But first came the loss of a paycheck, then the end of her marriage and then an eviction when she could not pay the rent.

"The emotional effect has been devastating," Ms. Robeck said. "The hardest part was being homeless, and not giving up."

For a time, the Robecks stayed with a friend in Ossining, in Westchester County, but the friend eventually asked them to leave, Ms. Robeck said. She took the children to a [Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing](#) center,

which places homeless families in emergency housing. The family was placed for six months in a temporary center in Chinatown. Ms. Robeck said conditions were “disgusting.”

The children were most bothered by the public showers. Sebastian, his mother said, “couldn’t take a shower; I would have to wait outside for him to make sure nobody was in the bathroom.” As for Brianna, she said, “she cried in the shower; it was filthy.”

Soon, Ms. Robeck herself was weeping. “I went over to the D.H.S. building, office of the Department of Homeless Services, and cried my eyes out,” she said.

After six months, they were transferred to the Harlem shelter, where they have been living since June 2010. “I try to fix it up to be as homey as possible,” Ms. Robeck said of their space. “All I think about is, how am I going to get them a home?”

“If they don’t have a home,” she said of the children, “they can’t have friends over.”

In her determination to make things as stable as possible, she resolved to find a way to send them back to camp, the one constant in a life that suddenly had few. But how to afford the fees? Ms. Robeck gets by on \$480 a month in food stamps, \$100 every two weeks in public assistance and \$374 a month in child support. She relies on [food pantries](#) to feed her family.

“Do you know how expensive food is in the city?” she said, her voice shaking with frustration. “You can’t survive.”

Ms. Robeck has also been struggling to find work. She has not had an interview in a long time despite frequently applying for jobs online. She has had no luck with hiring agencies, either. “I call them and call them and I don’t get anywhere,” she said.

She gets a little help from her ex-husband. Though he sees the children on occasion, she said, he is not able to provide a more stable life for them. “He does what he can,” she said. “He buys them clothes and sees them from time to time.”

In previous years, Ms. Robeck paid a small amount of the camp fees, the children received some scholarships, and some synagogues donated money, she said. This summer, Ms. Robeck was at the [West Side Campaign Against Hunger](#) on the Upper West Side when she described her situation to a worker there, who referred her to Nancy Neri, a case manager specialist at [the Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

With Ms. Neri’s help, the Robecks received a \$910 camp scholarship to pay for Camp Louemma — about 70 miles from New York City — for Brianna and Camp Surprise Lake in Cold Spring, N.Y. — about 60 miles north of the city — for Sebastian, both camps for Jewish youths.

Now, the children are back at public schools on the Upper West Side. But the memories of camp linger. Sebastian said his camp friends kept in touch, sending one another messages on Facebook. This summer, Brianna got to pick out her bunkmates at Camp Louemma. She gushed about being a “blue-water swimmer,” meaning she was among the best at camp.

“It’s memories that they’re always going to have,” Ms. Robeck said. “I mean, it’s like you really grow up over the summer there. You get to really acquire good social skills, patience.”

Missing out on their summer routine would have “broken their mold,” she added. “That’s why I’m very grateful.”