

### 'A Safe Place'

#### Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp Provides A World Of Understanding

By [Pete DeLea](#)



**Diamond McCowan, 8, of Washington, D.C., hands a pottery artifact to counselor Kip French during a mock archaeology dig at the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp on Thursday.**

Photos by Michael Reilly

**KEEZLETOWN** - For 8-year-old Kamiya Lewis, the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp is a chance to let her guard down.

When the Washington, D.C., native was a toddler, she was severely burned by a pan of boiling noodles that fell off the stove on top of her.

This week, she was one of 44 campers to gather at Camp Brethren Woods in Keezletown for the 21st annual burn camp, which had a "Passport to Egypt" theme. The camp featured a petting zoo with a camel and a cooking class called Pharaoh's Feast.

Lewis, who is in her third year at the camp, said it's a chance to be around other children and adults who understand what she's been through.

"It helps me because people are nice here," she said, adding that children at home sometimes tease her.

#### 'A Big Support Group'

Maryland resident Tonas Kalil said children such as Lewis are the reason he and fellow physical therapist Linda French started the camp in 1989.

"We do it to give the kids an opportunity to be with a group that understands what they've been through," said Kalil, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

The camp started in Maryland, then spent a few summers in Pennsylvania before moving to the Shenandoah Valley more than 10 years ago. After a few years at Camp Horizons, it moved to Camp Brethren Woods.

In addition to helping campers battle self-esteem issues, Kalil said the camp offers the children a chance to talk about general concerns all children face. Many of the children come from Maryland and Pennsylvania, as well as from throughout Virginia.

"It's a safe place to talk about issues," Kalil said. "It's like a big support group."

For Paulisa Brown, 21, the camp has been just that.

Brown, whose leg was burned after her diaper caught fire when she was a baby, started going to the camp when she was 8 years old.

For the past three years, she's served as a camp counselor.

"[The camp] made me feel positive about myself, so I wanted to give back and be a positive role model," said Brown, who is a rising senior at Cornell University.

While Brown is a burn victim, that's not the case with all the camp counselors.

Volunteer Matt Tobia, who has been working at the camp for five years, is a battalion chief with the Anne Arundel County Fire Department in Maryland.

Along with his wife, Jeanne Tobia, who works for the National Fallen Firefighters Association, he teaches the campers how to cook.

In keeping with this year's Egyptian theme, campers made Camel Crud, which is chocolate fudge and peanuts, and Mummy Brains, fried spaghetti that like a funnel cake.

Many of the campers have burns from accidents in the kitchen.

"The most common cause of burns is cooking injuries," said Tobia, adding that the camp gives children a safe place to return to the kitchen. "We want the kids to have the confidence again to work in the kitchen."

Firefighters, Police Chip In

While many of the volunteers come from other states, the Harrisonburg fire and police departments join firefighters from Augusta and Rockingham counties in helping out at the camp.

This year, firefighters with the Rockingham County Professional Firefighters Association waited tables at Applebee's Neighborhood Bar and Grill in Harrisonburg as a fundraiser.

The group raised \$4,458, enough to cover the costs for about six campers, who are not charged for the camp.

Lt. Wanda Willis, the city's fire prevention officer, talks with the campers and uses their experiences as lessons for students in Harrisonburg schools.

"We want to prevent what happened to them here," Willis said. Contact Pete DeLea at 574-6278 or [pdelea@dnronline.com](mailto:pdelea@dnronline.com)



**Counselor Tammy Smith (second from right) strolls back to nature study class with (left to right) Diamond McCowan, 8, Jason Francis, 9, and Rovylove Delima, 8, on Thursday.**



**Deaun President, 13, of Annapolis, Md., gets acquainted with Diesel, a Lab cattle dog used for therapy, as owner Jenna Ferguson watches. The Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp takes place at Camp Brethren Woods in Keezletown.**