

International Burn Camp comes to Baltimore, giving teen burn survivors a chance to just be kids



Fifteen-year-old Janan “Nina” Muhammad of West Baltimore visited the National Aquarium on Sunday as a part of the annual International Burn Camp, which helps teens ages 13 to 15 adapt and overcome their life-changing injuries. (Brittany Britto)



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Fifteen-year-old Janan “Nina” Muhammad of West Baltimore joined dozens of teens Sunday on a trip to the National Aquarium in Baltimore. But beyond shared awe of sleeping sloths and the strange feeling of jellyfish, the teenagers had one thing in common — they were burn survivors.

The 44 teens and 45 firefighter counselors in Baltimore were a part of the International Burn Camp, a weeklong camp hosted and sponsored by the Washington, D.C.-based International Association of Fire Fighters Foundation. The camp, headquartered in Camp Wabanna in Mayo, Md., in its 23rd year through Oct. 13, aims to help teens who have suffered from burns adapt and overcome their injuries through educational classes, bonding and therapeutic activities. The students, between the ages of 13 and 15, and counselors were selected from regional burn camps across the United States and Canada.

The burn camp’s activities continue this week with a trip to Washington for lunch at the Chinatown Firehouse with D.C. firefighters and visits to local and national museums; a trip to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, and a Carnival Day at camp headquarters, according to Tom Flamm, 63, an IAFF burn coordinator who has assisted and overseen the camp for the past seven years.

“We make sure you have fun, but that you are stronger as an individual when you leave,” Flamm said.

The camps often meet with a group therapist during the week, allowing the children to get comfortable with one another and talk about their scars, Janan said. There is also a range of courses, including cooking classes where students can learn about safety; arts and crafts; pool time and classes that teach life skills, according to Brendan Domotor, 28, a camp counselor and an Anne Arundel County firefighter

The camp's first group trip was to Baltimore to attend their choice of Maryland Fleet Week and Air Show or the National Aquarium.

Janan, who has attended the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp since 2016, chose the aquarium, where she touched her first jellyfish — another notable moment during her time at burn camp, where she has learned to be more comfortable with herself.

“I was finding people just like me and they were understanding what I went through,” she said of the camps.

In February 2016, Janan suffered from burn injuries to her arms, legs, neck and hand after a jar of hot oil used to make funnel cakes exploded, covering her body in the scalding liquid. She was admitted to the hospital for nine days and underwent treatment at home for two weeks.

Returning to school was “weird,” and at times, overwhelming — especially when people would ask her what happened, she said, but weeks later, she received a letter from the Mid-Atlantic Burn Camp, that would change her life. She attended that summer, the first time she met another burn survivor.

“I was so excited,” said Janan, who was reminded Sunday that at her first day at burn camp, she asked a girl, “Do you want to touch my scars?” Later that night — not knowing how to put her feelings into words — Janan remembered she cried happy tears.

“It's mixed emotions,” she said.

Domotor, also president of the Anne Arundel County Professional Firefighters Burn Foundation, said the camp fosters an environment “where kids are able to be kids.”

“When a burn survivor goes out into the ‘real world,’ unfortunately, you get a lot of stares,” Domotor said. “You don't necessarily *not* fit in, but you don't

look the same as everybody else all of a sudden.” But at camp, while the severity of burns may differ from student to student, every survivor can be themselves, he said.

“All barriers are broken down in the sense of bonding, learning, leadership and really — growth,” Domotor said.

Since her injury, Janan, who is Muslim, has become a “hijabi,” wearing a scarf that covers most of her body. Most of her scars aren’t visible to people around her. Still, she faces some hardships, she said. In one case, last year, a classmate yelled out loud that she should “go die already” after learning that she was going to laser therapy.

But Janan said the cruel comment didn’t bother her. The burn camps have helped her feel more comfortable with herself and reminded her that she’s not alone. She’s made friends, some of whom she sees outside of the annual burn camps. They’re like family.

"Everybody is really connected and really loving," Janan said.

“Nobody's feeling sorry for anybody, or gasping and saying, ‘Oh my God, what happened?’ We're all just burn survivors, and we don't have to ask each other what happened, because we know we're all connected by that one thing, and that's why we're there.”

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