

Jefferson Award Recipient

Francesca Tenconi Bay Area's Jefferson Award Recipient

A Place for Kids to be Kids

Jefferson Award Winner: Francesca Tenconi

Kate Kelly, Reporting

(CBS 5) At age 11, Francesca Tenconi was already a nationally ranked swimmer, dreaming of the Olympics. But that's the year she got sick. Blisters erupted all over her body. "There's antibodies in my body that recognize my skin as a foreign substance," Francesca explains. "So that is how the disease works and it creates blisters."

By the time doctors diagnosed pemphigus foliaceus, Francesca had lost 85% of her skin and was not expected to survive. But chemotherapy, steroids, and immuno-suppressant drugs saved her life. The ordeal gave her a new mission. "There wasn't a lot of knowledge about it, there wasn't any support system, there wasn't any support group," she says. So Francesca created that support network in the East Bay at Camp Wonder, a free, one-week summer camp for dozens of kids from around the country with skin diseases. "Nobody stares at you, nobody makes fun of you," says camper Autumn Sproul. "Everybody experiences the same thing." But this shared experience that can be painful. Forty doctors and nurses from across California volunteer their time to oversee medications and make daily bandage changes.

It's a process that can take as long as two hours for some children. But the medical team works hard to keep camp spirits high. Nurse Lauren Dines says, "We spoil them rotten and they kind of forget about the rest of the world, I think, and forget about the challenges." Now just 22, Francesca, has put on Camp Wonder for five years.. It's the only camp of its kind in the Western United States. Children enjoy all the typical camp activities like horseback riding, swimming, even a ropes course. It's a place they make life-long friends.

Camper Lizzie Fernandez told us she really looks forward to coming to camp because "it's so much fun." Lizzie's Mom Jenny says it's even more precious. "It gave her something really big to look forward to," she says. "You wouldn't think one week would make just a difference in a whole year, but it does." Francesca's just graduated from Duke University and will work full time on the foundation, raising money to support Camp Wonder. Her dream is to form a permanent endowment and become more politically active on behalf of the kids. "Skin diseases are considered orphaned diseases because they aren't really recognized and they are very serious," Francesca says. "They're not contagious, but they are serious and that is what we try to get across."

So for giving children a network of support, care, and friendship, this week's Jefferson Award in the Bay Area goes to Francesca Tenconi.

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