

Camp Phoenix

“Camp Phoenix is named after the mythological Greek bird that overcame adversity and prospered after rising out of the flames of hardship; in our eyes, each of our children can be like the phoenix and overcome their obstacles.”

Paul Mullan, MD

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When Dr. Paul Mullan was in college, he began working at camps for children with special needs and illnesses. As a volunteer, he was amazed at the ability of children with significant diseases such as cancer, diabetes, rheumatoid diseases, and AIDS to effortlessly incorporate the routines of disease management into their everyday lives; spending their days as kids, not kids with special needs. Arriving at medical school, Dr. Mullan started working with pediatric burn survivors in his medical school hospital. The realities he was faced with in the burn unit were startling. Every year, almost one million American children are burned. Fortunately, advancements in trauma and resuscitative care have led to more successful treatments of the injuries for the young patients. But, despite the advances, the psychosocial care of pediatric burn victims has lagged behind.

In response to these psychosocial needs, Dr. Mullan worked with a multidisciplinary team of medical students, pediatric residents, attendings, surgeons, physical therapists, occupational therapists, recreational therapists, risk-assessment managers, lawyers, administrators, public relations officers, insurance agents, and firefighters to create Camp Phoenix. Camp Phoenix is a free program run by volunteer medical students at Weill Cornell Medical College. It aims to improve pediatric burn victims' self-esteem and normalize their outlook on life by providing a safe and nurturing environment where they can forget about their burns in order to learn, grow, and play with other children facing similar challenges. The program sponsors four one-day events in New York City throughout the year and a three-day sleep-away camp outside the city every summer.

Camp Phoenix is currently in its sixth year, has involved over 100 pediatric burn survivors, and continues to expand every year. At Camp Phoenix, the prescription of the day is fun and friendship. Through a variety of activities such as group games, arts and crafts, team sports, and canoeing, the children have the opportunity for positive interactions with others who have similar experiences and emotions. These new friendships can help to replace a child's feelings of isolation and resentment with understanding and comfort. Medical student volunteers, residents, hospital staff, and firefighters interact with the children and establish a healthy and caring relationship with them, both as friends and positive role models.

Dr. Mullan and his team have extensive anecdotal evidence that these benefits extend outside the walls of Camp Phoenix and have helped improve other aspects of a child's life, including their education, family-life, and physical health. Before beginning initial

plans for the creation of Camp Phoenix, Dr. Mullan and the team referred to prior research efforts to support their vision of Camp Phoenix. In the Journal of the American Medical Association, a recent Harvard study¹ has shown that reintegration into regular activities that a child had participated in prior to the burn injury correlated with better general health and better physical functioning for the child. It was also shown that a child benefited enormously if he or she was provided with appropriate support from family and friends. With continued research, Dr. Mullan's team hopes to demonstrate these same benefits of improved health, better functioning, enhanced support, and decreased anxiety for the children who attend Camp Phoenix.

As one could imagine, creating an innovative and comprehensive camp program like Camp Phoenix requires immense resources, coordination, support, and time. Dr. Mullan ran into many challenges as he worked to create Camp Phoenix. Financially, the continued functioning of the camp requires \$20,000 a year, which is raised annually by Dr. Mullan and the multidisciplinary team involved. Time was the team's most valuable resource, and since they were working solely with volunteers, finding the time and manpower to bring the Camp Phoenix vision to fruition is a challenge that continues to be faced.

Dr. Mullan's insight into the need to create Camp Phoenix and meet the psychosocial needs of pediatric burn victims as well as his continued commitment to the camp throughout his residency is a testament to him as a community pediatrician. At the same time, Dr. Mullan has also learned a lot about medicine, community, and the strength of a group of committed people who share a common vision. Dr. Mullan comments, "To accomplish any great goal, 'it takes a village'." He learned that allowing individuals to add their mark both engages them and maintains their commitment to the mission. Dr. Mullan stresses, "This applies to everyone from the volunteer counselors, the donors, the administration, the lawyers, and most importantly, the children and the parents of those children." Dr. Mullan is certainly committed to the vision, and due to the proven success of Camp Phoenix, it seems that each person involved continues to find their niche and make their contribution to the growth of this vital program!

Dr. Mullan is a resident at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). He was honored with an Anne E. Dyson Child Advocacy Award in 2005 for his work with Camp Phoenix.

¹ Sheridan, et al. Long-term outcome of children surviving massive burns. JAMA 2000. Jan 5;283(1):69-73.