

UW Health: Burn camp camper turns counselor to help others

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MADISON, Wis. – In 1986, an accident changed Tanya Bolchen's life forever, but eight years later another event would change it again – for the better.

Bolchen was just four months old when a room air conditioner in her grandparents' Boscobel home overheated and set the curtains on fire in a room she was in. Amid the confusion of the moment as her family ran from the house, Bolchen was left behind, she said.

Her father ran back in to save her and when he grabbed her to carry her to safety, the air conditioning unit exploded, causing third-degree burns to her face, scalp, forearms and side, as well as severe burns to her father, she said. The two were flown to University Hospital, but Bolchen's father later died.

Bolchen survived, and for the next eight years she faced surgeries and healing while living a life that was as normal as it could be for someone with very noticeable burn scars. However, she felt there was no one who could truly identify with her until her nurse at UW Health shared information with her about the Summer Camp for Burn-Injured Youth, a week-long summer camp supported by the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin Charitable Foundation in collaboration with UW Health, especially for children with life-changing burn injuries.

The camp, held at Camp Timber-lee, near East Troy, is open to children 7 to 17, and includes all the activities of any other summer camp, like horseback riding, fishing, hiking and other outdoor sports and activities. There is also a one-day camp for children 3 to 6 years old.

After talking about it with her family, Bolchen gave it a try. There, she got to see

others with visible burns like hers, she said.

“I was a little on the fence at first because at that age I didn’t do well doing overnights, but I had a great time,” she said. “As a kid it helped me relate to other kids, and I got to see adults with burn scars and that is something I’d never seen before.”

She had such a great time, that she went back year after year, and when she became too old to attend as a camper, she found a way to stay – by becoming a camp counselor.

Being a counselor was a logical transition as her favorite part of camp every year was the counselors because she would see the same people year after year, she said.

“They are like a family,” Bolchen said. “They tried to make it fun no matter what, like one time when it was raining, we all ran outside to play kickball in the rain.”

This is an experience she wants other kids to have, she said.

“I’m just trying to keep it there for the kids growing up who need it,” Bolchen said.

This year, the traditional form of the camp is back, Aug. 7 to 13, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the event. In 2020, the camp was virtual, and in 2021, due to pandemic public health restrictions, the camp was held in two different age categories over different times during the week.

Because many of the campers and volunteers come from referrals and events that take place in person throughout the year, enrollment and staff levels are down this year because those events didn’t take place in the same way the last two years, Bolchen said.

The foundation is asking the community to refer families with children who qualify to participate and anyone who is willing to volunteer, according to Lori Mickelson, nurse, and program director, UW Health Burn and Wound Center.

“This is an incredible resource for the children it serves, and we want as many kids as possible to participate, but it can’t happen without volunteers,” she said. “There is room for both this year.”

[Registration](#) for the camp is encouraged by July 31. To volunteer, please visit the Professional Fire Fighters of Wisconsin Charitable Foundation's [website](#).

A recorded interview with Bolchen is available, and Mickelson is available for interviews. Photos of Bolchen and B-roll of the camp are available.