

“Allison & ASCCA – Always Within Our Hearts”

In the opening paragraph of the chapter titled “Happy Camper: Part One” of Allison Wetherbee’s book I Was Born This Way, she writes about coming home one day from second grade and exclaiming, “I want to go to Girl Scout camp!” She remembered that she was “ready to go right then.” She went on to say that “the camp she was so excited about would not accept me without a full-time caretaker to see to my needs. Going to camp with my mom or an attendant just didn’t sit right with the free-spirited child that I was. I wanted to go to camp by myself JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE.”

These feelings Allison had of wanting to be just like everyone else, wanting to participate in an activity like summer camp with her peers and WITHOUT her parents, and the desire to be independent all ring true to most of the campers that attend Easterseals Camp ASCCA each year. Camp ASCCA isn’t just about the traditional camp activities, the outdoor education, and accessible recreation, it is also very important for socialization, unique activities one would have never thought possible, and the strong bonds created between fellow campers and staff members. When describing Camp ASCCA to people, I often say that as staff members, we rarely hear about how “so-and-so camper misses the zipline SO MUCH”, or how “my daughter cried happy tears telling me about the pool.” No, parents and guardians almost always talk about how their child misses their counselors and camp friends. Many campers tell us it is the only place they feel “normal” and it’s the one place people don’t stare at them.

Camp ASCCA is Alabama’s Special Camp for Children and Adults. The mission is to help individuals with disabilities and/or health impairments achieve equality, dignity, and maximum independence. Camp ASCCA opened for its first summer in 1976. Since then, Camp ASCCA has been open year-round, providing fun and accessible programming for people with disabilities. And YES, summer camp is the highlight of our year!

Camp ASCCA is a special place where campers with disabilities have the opportunity to express their individuality, ability, and independence within a

supervised setting. The activities offered at Camp include swimming, canoeing, fishing, arts & crafts, a waterslide, three ziplines, tubing on the lake, archery, mini golf, nature, a splash pad, fishing, dancing, concerts, talent shows, and much, much more.

Allison Wetherbee and her family found out about Camp ASCCA from a “hometown friend” in the late 1970’s and she decided to give it a try. She had rarely been around other children with disabilities and looked forward to her new adventure. As with most other parents dropping their child off for summer, her parents were more nervous than Allison herself! If you have the chance, please try to get your hands on a copy of Allison’s book, she has some great stories about her time at Camp.

Allison was raised in southwest Alabama by parents and alongside two sisters who didn’t treat her any different than any other person. She was taught and learned to do most things by herself. Her family thought this to be very important for her growing up and to experience life just like anyone else. Attending Camp ASCCA reinforced this independence and she had fun while doing it. She left a mark on many people at camp. With experiences like learning to swim, riding a horse, canoeing, and other activities, every person I meet who knows Allison from Camp ALWAYS has a great story to tell. There were songs sang, whispers and giggles in the dark, her wanting to reach the bottom of the pool so someone took her (cover your ears, Gloria!), and other adventures and misadventures throughout the years. Camp ASCCA has always been and will always be an important part of life for anyone.

Before meeting Allison, I would often go a visit a club or organization to speak about Camp ASCCA and our mission. Again, I heard many stories about people meeting Allison and how encouraged or inspired they were by her. SHE left THEM with a positive outlook on life and what Camp ASCCA does for people and at times I felt like I kind of knew her. She didn’t even know what was being said of her while she was living her life up in Muscle Shoals as a professional mental health counselor! From the last time she was at Camp ASCCA and stretching over the next 15-20 years, her legacy was still going strong in our Camp ASCCA world.

Allison often spoke and wrote about God's "plan" for her. In late 2007, God's plan for Allison continued in a new direction. She started communicating with many "camp people" again and began speaking to our administrator about how she can get involved with Camp ASCCA. Allison was offered a full-time job as the Public Relations Director. Soon after her hiring, Allison moved to Camp ASCCA and into her own house. She hired a personal attendant and hit the ground running, or I should say rolling. As the PR director, Allison was a great spokeswoman for our organization visiting many social and civic clubs, talking to parent groups, student groups, various nonprofits and participating in many interviews for print, web based, and broadcast media. She not only shared her own personal experiences with Camp ASCCA, but perfectly and dynamically told the Camp ASCCA story. She was wonderful at doing this not only because she embodied what Camp ASCCA is, but also because she LIVED the experience in her younger years.

Speaking of her younger years, Allison had actually worked for Camp ASCCA in her teens as well. For three summers starting in 1986, Allison was a public relations assistant. Again, making a huge impact on all who she encountered, Allison worked with the PR team in giving tours, speaking to groups, encouraging donors to give, and writing great stories and articles about Camp, its campers, and staff.

In her book, in the chapter "Happy Camper: Part Two," Allison wrote that she "felt complete, understood, and at ease" at Camp ASCCA. She said her "parents paved the way for all the accomplishments I've achieved in life. Attending Camp ASCCA provided the springboard that allowed me to know I could achieve [my] goals." Independence, confidence, grit, ability, and friendships are all positive and we are lucky to have been a part of Allison's life.

Did you know that Allison had never been down a waterslide? Nope, she hadn't. But because Camp ASCCA is a place that is always looking forward to making new and unique opportunities happen for people with disabilities, she was the first person with a disability to ride down the new Camp ASCCA waterslide in 2010. The other staff members and I had a wonderful time together with Allison. We all collaborated well at work and also had many adventures along the way in many

personal experiences like parties, nights out on the town, movies, and even getting massages! Y'all should've seen the masseuse's face when we rolled in.

Allison eventually decided to move to the Shoals area of the state and work remotely and on-the-road for Camp ASCCA. She had a difficult time hiring and keeping attendants in the Lake Martin area and chose to return to where she had close friends and years of relationships. Besides being in Camden with her family, Muscle Shoals felt more like home to her.

The last time I saw Allison was I think a week before she passed away. It was summer camp time at Camp ASCCA, and she made regular visits to Camp to help with tours, spend time with campers, and greeting donors and friends. I had rarely helped Allison at mealtimes, but that afternoon she asked me to eat with her so we could catch up. We collaborated closely in our jobs and as friends, she asked me about my kids, and I asked her about her family and lifestyle. I feel very blessed to have spent more time than usual with Allison that day. She usually was zipping around very busily and socially.

On the morning she passed away, our administrator and I had left early to attend a meeting I can't remember and were returning back to the office. We were approaching the Camp ASCCA gate on the road when we received the call from Allison's friend to tell us the news. I had never experienced disbelief before and felt for sure she was calling the wrong person with the wrong information. It was unbelievable to me. I even tried to call her cellphone to tell her this was a mistake and willed her to answer her phone.

Many of us here today have been blessed to have known Allison Wetherbee, or known of her. Allison talked about accepting herself and was a role model to help kids and adults, with or without disabilities, accept themselves too. She touched countless lives. Allison has a strong legacy as an important woman in Alabama and I hope her story will be passed on for lifetimes and remembered for the strong person she was.

There is an outdoor entertainment space at Camp ASCCA named "The Outpost". Many talent shows, bands, musical guests, and parties have happened at this spot

over the years, and we believe Allison would have enjoyed the space immensely. There is a memorial wall at The OutPost for Allison. It has the Camp “goodnight song” written on it with her picture. When I hear the part of the song that says, “So campers hold hands and say we’ll never part... for Camp ASCCA and all our friends will live within our hearts,” I remember Allison.

Thank you to Allison’s family for sending her to us and helping to make her the amazing woman she was that is being installed here today at the Alabama Women’s Hall of Fame.

Congratulations Wetherbee Family and thank you all for her recognition today.

Written by Dana Rickman, representing Allison Wetherbee for Easterseals Camp ASCCA
For the Alabama Women’s Hall of Fame Installation of Allison Wetherbee
March 3, 2022