



From Childhood Cancer Survivor to Camp Doctor:

A Journey of Resilience and Healing

BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

It's hard to imagine much worse for a seven-year-old boy than being diagnosed with cancer. For Christopher Woll, MD '13, it was an alveolar sarcoma in his left calf, which required surgeries to remove the tumors, followed by several rounds of chemotherapy and radiation.

In addition to those traditional therapies, his oncologist offered one more prescription: summer camp. Specifically, the Double H Ranch, a camp that had been founded the previous year in the Adirondacks to treat children with life-threatening illnesses, staffed by volunteer physicians from Albany Medical Center and beyond.

At only seven years old, Dr. Woll had never been away from home other than his hospital stays. But his parents, reassured by the presence of medical professionals on site, thought it might do him good. Although petrified to go, "it was absolutely wonderful," Woll recalls of his first camp experience.

Double H Ranch was a sanctuary where laughter, friendships, and shared experiences transformed the lives of its campers. "I think the biggest thing that stuck out to me was the counselors and how invested they were in making sure that everybody had a good time," says Woll. "In addition to not standing out as the sick kid, I was exposed to a lot of new cool things, such as horseback riding, a high ropes course, and fishing and boating out on the lake. I loved every second of it."

At the end of the week, he told camp director Max Yurenda: "I want to be you when I grow up."

This summer was the camp's 30th year. It also marked a full-circle moment for Woll, who took the helm as medical director, responsible for the camp's medical staff, volunteers, and medical protocols. But Woll does more than just provide exceptional medical oversight—his personal journey, along with compassion, empathy, and understanding, exemplifies life beyond disease and that dreams can be realized even in the face of adversity.

"Nothing means more to me than to provide a normal experience for campers, and to do so, hopefully, for generations to come," he says.

Impact and Inspiration

That first summer was just the spark. Woll would go on to spend a week at Double H Ranch every summer until he aged out of being a camper, then became a counselor. His camp support system helped him emotionally through a reoccurrence of his cancer at age 16—tumor metastases in his lungs that required surgical removal.

The experiences of being a patient and a camper surrounded by other patients had a profound impact. "I was essentially surrounded by medicine during my formative years of childhood," he says. "I never really had any ambitions outside of something medical," he says, "although I never expected to become a doctor."

As a high school senior, Woll applied and was

Dr. Woll as a camper (opposite page left), camp counselor (opposite right), and currently as medical director (below)





In addition to providing medical care to campers (opposite page), Dr. Woll enjoys the opportunity to participate with campers during their daily activities.

accepted into Upstate Medical University's radiation therapy program. He first completed two years of prerequisites at the University of Buffalo, followed by two years at Upstate, continuing to spend his summers as a camp counselor at Double H Ranch. But within his first year working as a radiation therapist, Woll realized that his career choice wasn't the right fit.

"I like organized chaos, which is why working at camp was right up my alley," he says. "Radiation therapy is very regimented. It's the same thing every day. I also realized that I very much wanted to work with a pediatric population."

Woll began taking additional science classes at SUNY Albany and applied to Upstate's Norton College of Medicine. It wasn't just that he was familiar with Upstate—there was another reason he only applied to one school. His girlfriend (and now wife) Kate Myers Woll, MD '12, had just started medical school at Upstate. The two had met as counselors at Double H Ranch the summer before his senior year as an undergrad.

Woll began medical school guided by a deep sense of purpose and unwavering determination to become a pediatrician. During the summer after his first year, he was able to create an elective that allowed him to spend the summer at Double H Ranch, shadowing camp medical director Kathleen Braico, MD, and serving as a medical volunteer.

Woll began each day at the camp medical facility doing rounds with the camp doc to check in on anybody staying there for overnight observation. "The biggest thing at camp is infectious outbreaks, so we would go through the logbook for every visit over the past 24 hours to make sure that there was no indication of any infectious outbreaks, and if there was, we would talk about what we had to do in order to mitigate that. If there weren't any medical procedures or first aid emergencies, we would be out getting involved with all the different activities and seeing how we could be most helpful," he says.

More than anything, assisting with those activities and in the cabins exposed Woll to how kids with different abilities get through their daily lives. "As a healthcare

provider, it was very important seeing these patients move through activities out in the world as opposed to sitting in an office. It's very easy for me to say do X, Y, and Z to a patient, but to see how that actually plays out in someone's life is a very different perspective."

Being "backstage" to the medical side of camp planted a seed that this could be a future career.

Woll followed medical school with a pediatric residency at Duke University and a fellowship in pediatric emergency medicine at Yale University. He and wife Kate settled in Albany, where Woll works as a full-time physician at the Massry Family Children's Emergency Center at Albany Medical Center and as associate professor in the Departments of Pediatrics and Emergency Medicine. Kate is a pediatrician in nearby Latham, New York.

From the camp's founding, Albany Medical Center has played a major role in supplying volunteer medical professionals, which has included Woll since his return to Albany. In addition to its full-time medical staff, campers are cared for by a cadre of physicians who volunteer for a week at a time, coming from across the United States for the experience. Woll had planned to be one of those weekly volunteers, but camp leadership had other ideas.

When Dr. Braico—medical director during the camp's entire existence—began thinking about retirement, it was time to develop a succession plan. "They reached out to ask if I would be interested in taking over," Woll recalls.

He was, but there were logistical issues to work out. Braico was a general pediatrician who lived local to the camp and was able to be onsite daily while camp was in session. With a full-time hospital job and two small children of his own, Woll's time commitment would have to be different.

He began by joining the camp's medical advisory board, which provides guidance on policy and protocol development. "I became a lot more involved in the behind the scenes planning," he says.

During 2021, Woll shadowed Braico during several summer sessions, which included a reduced number of campers due to COVID-19. He took the reins full time that fall, spending the winter focused on policy training, securing volunteers, and orientation development, making sure everything was ready to go come summer 2023. When the Double H Ranch opened its doors to campers in June, Woll was there to welcome them as medical director.

A Commitment to Inclusion

In 1991, entrepreneur Charles Wood purchased 320-acres in Lake Luzerne, New York, with a goal to expand Paul Newman's Connecticut Hole in the Wall Camp to the Adirondacks. Wood, who had developed amusement parks and resorts in nearby Lake George, enlisted Newman's help to establish the Double H Ranch and create a medically state-of-the-art facility. Since the Ranch officially opened its doors on July 4, 1993, it has served over 60,000 children dealing with life-threatening illnesses from around the world, offering its camp experience free of charge. The second "Hole in the Wall Camp," it is now part of what has become

a worldwide network of not-for-profit recreational and therapeutic experiences for children with serious illness called the Serious Fun Children's Network.

The goal is simple: to provide a safe summer camp experience for children and teens who would otherwise be unable to attend due to the seriousness of their illnesses. Double H Ranch has doctors and nurses on site 24 hours a day and a medical facility on site. Approximately 50–100 campers attend each session, including those with cancer, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia or bleeding disorders, HIV, immune disorders, collagen vascular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, neuromuscular disorders, mitochondrial disorders, muscular dystrophy and congenital heart disease.

According to Woll, the Double H Ranch is one of the few camps within the Serious Fun Children's Network that brings kids together in the same session with mixed diagnoses. The only exception is a session for kids who are ventilator dependent, which is held the first week of the season.

In addition to orienting the medical staff, Woll assists in training the camp's counselors, most of them recent high school graduates or college students. While some are former campers, others are interested in medical careers, social work, or teaching. "None of them have in-depth knowledge of the disease entities we serve at camp, so we have to give them a crash course in the medical knowledge they need and what to be on the lookout for," he says.

Medical needs range from kids who require total care—only one or two per cabin—to those requiring medication only. "We provided approximately 7,000 medication passes last summer," Woll says.

The camp has five nurses on site for the entire summer, supplemented by volunteers so that any given week there are up to 12 nurses and two physicians on site, one generalist and one from a specialty trained in acute care management—typically critical care, emergency medicine or pediatric hospitalist. Woll was in residence during the ventilator camp and is on site the first day of each new session. "I love seeing the campers faces as they arrive the first day," he says.

During camp season, he works nights at the hospital, so he has the freedom to visit camp during the day if the need arises. He credits his wife for his ability to take on the additional role and looks forward to his own children being old enough to stay in cabins so that she can return to camp as a volunteer as well.

"This has been a life-changing experience for me in terms of the relationships I developed as a camper and a counselor," says Woll. "These are people I am still best friends with, including my wife."

But Woll says the benefits of spending time at Double H Ranch are not limited to its campers. The Serious Fun Children's Network recently conducted research on camp medical volunteers that shows the experience helps increase resilience and reduce burnout among providers.

"It is very easy to get stuck in the daily grind of things at the hospital or in the clinic, to get beat down by the bureaucracy," Woll says. "But a week at camp provides a reminder of the positive impact of what we do and a recharge for the year ahead. For me, the camp experience allows me to be more balanced in everything else I do. And I'm always looking forward to next summer's camp adventure." ■

