

OB/OOCH Upstream 2007: Reflections on an Upstream Journey

by Laura Edmonstone

“Louder, Daddy! Louder!”

My first taste of Camp Oochigeas came amid shouts and songs from a swarm of people gathered around a shiny coach bus, with the voice of one young fireball ringing through above the rest, rousing her waiting father to join in the songs. “C’mon, Daddy! Louder!”

We arrived at Camp Oochigeas on the morning of the last day of the session, just in time to ride the wave of adrenalin and fatigue that comes at the end of an intense camp experience. With the back of the bus disappearing around the corner onto Highway 141, the few remaining campers and their families scattered for home (including the formidable set of lungs mentioned previously), and the team of dedicated volunteers pulled together to tidy up and prepare for the next team of volunteers and campers who would arrive the following day. Whoosh! I was caught in the whirlpool, riding the eddy upstream, unaware of what was to come when I got caught in the next rush of current!

Foolishly, I thought I was close to having seen it all in the outdoor world — and then I arrived at Ooch. I was there as part of a team, privileged to work a program that partnered three strong organizations with a wealth of knowledge and experience in working with kids. Camp Oochigeas operates a volunteer-based program for kids with and affected by childhood cancer, and partners with the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) to provide an enriching experience onsite at SickKids, at Oochigeas and around Toronto. As instructors for Outward Bound Canada, our role at Ooch was to facilitate a wilderness experience for senior campers called “Upstream.” The goal of Upstream

was to build confidence, independence and outdoor and leadership skills and to challenge participants to metaphorically widen their circle by stepping outside of their comfort zones.

Our participants were between the ages of 16 and 19 and came from a wide range of backgrounds, with diverse expectations, skills and goals. Some of the campers had shared in the Ooch experience before, while others were new. Most of the campers knew each other so the one or two new faces added its own challenge in terms of inclusion and group development. Participants in the Upstream program were at different stages of their cancer experience, but all were finished with active treatment and able to participate in a challenging two-week wilderness canoe trip.

While there are many specific details that I could share about the Upstream program, what I’m really excited about sharing is the pleasure I found in working together as part of a team of professionals from broad backgrounds, and some reflections on our experience of Ooch culture.

Welcome to Ooch — Jump Right In!

As anyone who has met an Outward Bound (OB) instructor probably knows, OB is steeped in a rich culture and grounded in strong philosophical roots. Much value is placed on experiential learning and the conscious use of metaphor and reflection as tools for both teaching and learning. So, it was with much delight that my co-instructor, a recent import from OB Australia, and I headed off for a week of traditional camp experience, working as counsellors, prior to meeting with our Upstream students. I spent the week with a gaggle of six- to seven-year old boys,

catching frogs, swimming, boating, farting, and generally playing hard and sleeping even harder. I also had the privilege of working with a team of six Ooch volunteers, a moxie group of professionals from all walks of life who wanted to spend their days off making a difference in somebody else's life. What a fabulous experience!

As the Upstream start approached, we struggled to drift away from our young superheroes and to put our teenage ballcaps back in place. Meeting the full complement of our team helped put it in perspective; we would be a team of four — two OB instructors and two nurses from SickKids who would work together to facilitate the Upstream experience for seven eager participants.

Now, in my experience, it is one thing to lead a trip with a co-instructor and it's entirely another thing to lead a trip solo. How was this going to work with four of us at the helm?

Who's Sterning This Boat?

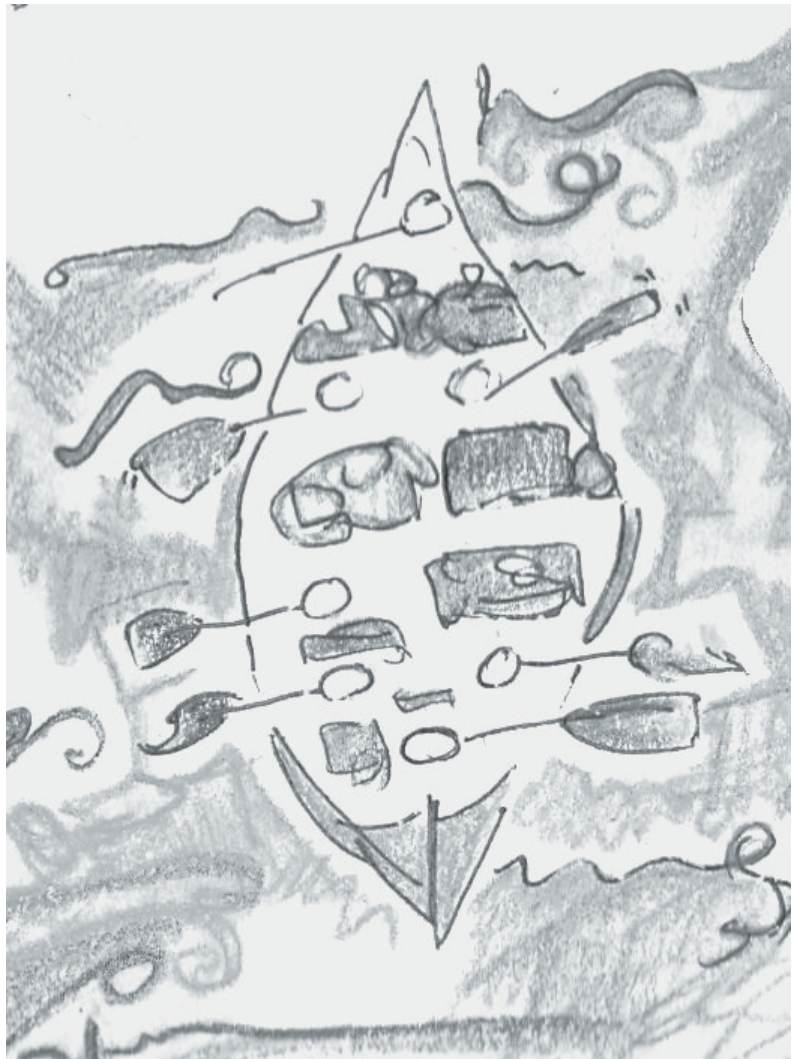
It worked beautifully. Working in a team of four, we were able to take the time to get to know each of the students, to get to know each other, and to share perspectives and experiences in an open way. It provided us all with the opportunity to view the trip from a different shore than we may have if there were just two of us.

Both nurses had strong backgrounds in tripping, and while the skills and environment weren't new to them, the flow and

philosophy of an OB course were. Given that we work for different OB schools, my co-instructor and I also carried varied interpretations of the OB philosophy in our packs, so it was rewarding to share and build the experience for the students together in a deliberate and thoughtful way. Splash in a dose of Ooch culture, supplied unselfconsciously by the participants and we had a team that was ready to paddle up any stream!

What Are We Out Here for Anyway?

One of my most remarkable learning moments came when I realized how little cancer was the focus of our trip. This was in stark contrast to my experiences leading trips



Art credit: Sarah Horsley

for adult cancer survivors, for whom much camaraderie and rapport was built through sharing personal triumphs and tragedies with cancer.

At Oochigeas, cancer is not the focus; sure, there were campers with overt signs of the disease, but the focus was camp, allowing kids to be kids and have fun outdoors. Out on the water it was a similar story; while some Upstream participants took medications and sported scars and other impacts from months or years of medications, cancer was not something that entered our group consciousness in the way that I thought it might. The focus of our trip was on the standard pillars and milestones of an OB course – compassion, teamwork, craft, self-reliance, physical challenge and service to others.

It wasn't until the last night of the course that the floodgates opened and our kids started talking in detail about their feelings and experiences with cancer. That said, it was a very mature, insightful reflection and a coming together through a sharing of similar experiences. Thoughts were shared matter-of-factly, and I was struck by the air of calm and confidence that came through in their stories. I didn't hear self-pity or anger at alienation from friends, or disappointment they had missed out on certain activities in school. They had certainly experienced alienation, but for the most part, they had worked through it and felt stronger because of it.

This natural conversation arose because of the positive rapport participants had developed with each other and with the staff team. Everyone had had time to relax and reflect on how they had widened their circle through the Upstream experience. It was one of those magic moments when all the hard work comes together in a way you hadn't imagined it would.

It was also a significant and cathartic discussion between the students and nurses – they each had the opportunity to ask questions that time at the hospital just does not allow. As an outsider to the SickKids experience, it was remarkable to listen. The nurses asked what treatments feel like, shared what it feels like to know a kid isn't going to make it, and shared how heartbreaking and breathtaking it can be to work in that environment. The students shared stories about how they had fooled nurses into visiting their rooms, how thrilled they were by the special events offered at SickKids and how terrified they were to have ports inserted and to lose their hair the first time.

In an environment like a hospital where people are forced to come together because of intense circumstances, they don't always get the opportunity to say thank you or communicate feelings because it is inappropriate or unprofessional or there simply isn't enough time. After paddling upstream with seven incredible young people and three committed colleagues, it was absolutely thrilling to turn our boats into the downstream current that night, and to ride out the wavetrain, bobbing and laughing together in the moonlight.

As we drove away from Oochigeas roughly a month after we first arrived, I thought back to the conviction I had heard in that young girl's voice on our arrival. "Louder, Daddy! Louder!" The Camp Oochigeas motto is "You have failed only when you have failed to try. Act as if it is impossible to fail and it will be." I smiled, confident that Ooch had helped give that young woman, our campers and our staff team just what it takes to paddle upstream.

Laura Edmonstone works full time as a high school special education teacher and strives to keep one foot in the outdoor community.