***The Belly of the Beast***

By Pam Boe

We got suckered into chaperoning a John Poole Middle School sixth grade outdoor education trip last week. That was three days and two nights of our lives we’ll never get back: The food was awful (though it didn’t stop me from taking seconds); the showers were way too small (believe me when I say that a cold, wet shower tile on your bum will wake you up faster than any amphetamine ever could—and no, I don’t want to elaborate); and, I’m stillworking out the kinks and indents the poorly-sprung, six-inch-too-short bunk carved into my soft and tender flesh—but Varmint had an honest-to-goodness fantastic time and wants to go again.

I won’t lie to you: I was initially totally against her going on a school-sponsored trip for three days. I’m not a big believer in the ability of any institution to herd cats in so great a number—I was convinced mayhem would ensue!—and most importantly, I value my ever-shrinking time with my Varmint and don’t toss it away casually.

She wanted to go, my friends were pushing me to let her, and even My Captain was urging me to relent. After all, if he was willing to go and sleep in a bunkroom full of eleven-year-old boys he didn’t know, surelyI could loosen up a little and let Varmint go—right? If I valued my Varmint Time so much, by golly, I could go, too.

So the papers were signed, orientations were attended, everyone was packed, and before we knew it, My Captain and I were slinging luggage (er, technically, he was slinging luggage).

Unfortunately, the night before we left, my past crept up on me, skulking forth from the back of my memories, whispering things like: This is the perfect opportunity for the bullies to shine; this is the chance Mean Girls will take to be unkind; this is the kind of thing that scars a child well into adulthood. I woke up with chills and sweats.

I wasn’t scared for Varmint…I was scared for myself!

Apparently, I have issues.

I needn’t have listened to the whisperings. The first couple of hours felt like a party: Kids were laughing, and there was an overall sense of freedom. This lasted until the first group meeting where we met (insert scary music) Nurse Ratchet. Nurse Ratchet was apparently in charge of all of the bunkhouses. She was the one who made sure the kids cleaned the rooms adequately for inspection. She was the one who would be bouncing dimes off of the beds. She meant business, and I was scared for all of us—my childhood memories snickered.

After that, I was assigned a bunk room and assigned the young ladies I would be in charge of (stop laughing). Now, look, this was not my first rodeo. I knew better than to arrive empty handed. I brought decorations, I brought games, I brought gifts like matching pencils and stationery. I brought air fresheners, and nightlights, and the smell of motherhood (I’m not entirely prepared to explain that comment). I went to the cabin early and prepared for battle—my skulking childhood fears cackled.

The campers arrived. Some with smiles, some with hesitation, and some with trepidation, but they all looked to me when they walked in, got a big whiff of that smell of Mommy, and slowly relaxed. My objective was to inject confidence into them, to exude peace and a sense of “It’s going to be alright!” for them. I even gave the speech, “Please come to me if you feel homesick or need a Mama Hug.” I was the quintessential Mama Bear. I also gave the speech, “We will be kind to one another. Capisce?” They were.

They were not only kind to each other, but they were kind to the rest of the grade, as well as the teachers and volunteers. They wrote thank you notes every night to the staff. They helped each other keep the bunkroom clean. They took turns showering and dressing without argument. They were wonderful. They were absolutely wonderful. My skulking childhood camp memories, my dark sense of foreboding, all of that was pushed back to the recesses of my mind.

So often I hear that the younger generations are rotten, are failing, are rude and unsociable. I spent three condensed days with them, three days immersed in them. I was in the belly of the beast, I tell you! It turns out that the beast…is actually more like a puppy dog. I can promise you that we need not fear for the future generation, at least not the sixth graders at John Poole Middle School.

They are going to be just fine.