

Facing Forward



A B O U T F A C E

No More Excuses by Patrycja Domurad

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The group – AboutFace's Adult Retreat, 2015

The first time I participated in an AboutFace program was the Adult Retreat this past June.

I discovered AboutFace when I was 18, just past the cut-off point for Camp Trailblazers. My experience with the organization has been solely in a support-role through various fundraisers and volunteer stunts, advocating for programs that I believe in, but until this past June, I didn't really *know*.

When the opportunity came to attend this year's Adult Retreat, I was skeptical of myself. I thought I didn't need to get together and hash over some painful memories to relate to others. I thought that I was pretty on top of my emotional baggage and didn't see the benefit of a retreat. I basically had no idea what to expect, and made a lot of excuses to protect myself from the uncertainty of putting myself into an environment I was unfamiliar with. I guess you could say that like any skittish camper, I was nervous at the prospect of leaving home and connecting with people who I was supposed to have so much in common with by sheer default of my facial difference.

I'll do anything to help the kids and get them to Camp Trailblazers, I thought. But I'm not willing to do it for myself, because I'm used to doing things *by myself*.

After my car accident at age 14, I felt extremely isolated in my life experiences of living with a facial difference. It was impossible for my friends and family to truly relate to me, and despite their best attempts to protect me from the cold, harsh world out there, it just heightened my sense of freakishness to have to have an entourage protect me from stranger's reactions. I wore sunglasses in public constantly covering up my prosthetic eye and facial scarring, yet my kryptonite was that they were tinted lenses that would eventually illuminate my facial difference for a more jarring surprise to strangers than had I just gone without my mask. That initial shocked reaction a stranger has, the moment of realization that there you look differently and there may be something wrong with you, is hard to get used to. I remember trying to explain my emotions in the early days and being met with a stunned silence. No one had the answers for how I should deal with what happened to me, and I took it personally.

Therein was born the false belief that my facial difference isolated me from the world. That no one would understand me. At the time, I had not realized that *I had isolated myself* because I had made the experience about me. I never once stopped and considered what my friends and family must have felt not knowing what to say. What could one say to a 14 year old girl who lost her facial identity?

Today I would say to her that she is not alone, no matter how bad it may feel. And I would tell her about this great camp I know...

Although a lot of my realizations and "aha" moments in my life that led me to happiness were experiences I had to walk through alone, I was never truly alone experiencing them. Whether I was in a crowded hot yoga class, in a personal development seminar surrounded by thousands of people also looking for answers, or touching friends and strangers alike through my writing, my greatest moments of personal transformation were all times I shared with other people.

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So I signed up for the Adult Retreat, nervous as I was. I decided to join in on some of this AboutFace magic I've been hearing about, and even preaching about in my fundraising campaigns. I decided to embrace my inner camper and HAVE FUN!

I met so many amazing people that travelled from all over to attend the retreat. We stayed at the rustic and charming Pow Wow Lodge in scenic Huntsville, Ontario, and spent 3 days playing games, dining together, and enjoying each other's company basking in the sunshine, or under the stars.

My favourite part, was the whole group coming together for a conference call with some of the board members. Our voices and opinions mattered when discussing upcoming AboutFace campaigns. It was clear we weren't just there for the retreat, but that we were also valued members of the AboutFace family. As a collective force, I'm excited to see what we create in the coming months!

The Adult Retreat was everything an outing in Canadian cottage country should be. We stayed up until 2am around the roaring campfire, where I coerced some friends into helping me polish off my ridiculously oversized bottle of wine. I woke up too early on our last morning to jump into the icy lake with some crazy ladies. There was an unspoken rule of musical chairs in the dining hall so that every meal ensured a different dining neighbour to talk to. No one was left out, everyone was included, and it was effortless to be relaxed.

There wasn't a general introduction that I was dreading, "Hi, my name is Patrycja and my facial difference is...", but rather we got to know each other organically as the weekend progressed, and connect and share without the need to emphasize our common woes. It was refreshing to have someone nod and look at you, not because they didn't know what to say, but because they didn't have to say anything at all.

We all promised to keep in touch and see each other next year. Some of them I will see sooner. Let's just say, I can't stay away. I'm looking forward to being a counsellor at the Ontario Camp Trailblazers in August along with some of my Adult Retreat comrades! And I'm excited to see firsthand the amazing experiences of these lucky campers in this beautiful AboutFace community.

I'm also looking forward to returning to Pow Wow Lodge this September for R.I.D.E. Muskoka, a cycling fundraising event to support the amazing Camp Trailblazers! I'm raising \$1000 for the 30k ride and I'm looking forward to seeing some of you readers out there, taking in some the beautiful scenery and soaking up some of this AboutFace community magic.

Please donate to my personal page by [CLICKING HERE](#).

Or join me on a 30km OR 100km ride, [CLICK HERE](#) to participate and for more info on the event.

