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**CALENDAR**

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**SUMMER CAMP CAMPAIGN**

# A rustic setting gave her a fresh outlook

By AMY KAUFMAN  
Times Staff Writer

Jennifer Villaman remembers being 9 years old, squirming anxiously in a seat on the bus that was taking her — for the first time — away from home.

And the home she shared with her single mother, a small apartment in Los Angeles, was very important to Jennifer. As a young girl, home was where Jennifer helped take care of her mom, whose kidney failure had led to dialysis.

"At first I was homesick and felt bad for leaving my mom, but when I started enjoying myself at activities, I forgot about all the bad stuff," Jennifer, now 17, said of her first summer at Camp Max Straus.

Tucked away in the more rustic region of Glendale, a mere two traffic lights from the freeway, the camp hosts 120 underprivileged children during sessions ranging from five to 12 days. Here, kids ages 7 to 12 can hike winding trails, perform skits and shoot photos.

Older kids, ages 13 to 17, head off to be a part of the Witherbee Wilderness program, a High Sierra backpacking trip that challenges the kids' minds as well as their bodies.

Ninety percent of the children who arrive at camp are from families below the poverty line, according to Margy Feldman, president and chief executive of Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles, which owns and operates the summer program.

Exposure to nature — and to animals, in particular — can affect the children's human relations in an unexpected manner.

"Many kids don't have healthy peer-adult relationships," said Feldman. "Starting with animals, even horseback riding, is a wonderful place to help build that self-esteem."

A healthful living program is promoted by food that campers serve one another in the cafeteria.

"I remember the food being really good," recalled Jennifer, who will work in the camp's kitchen this summer. "Like homemade lasagna, birthday cake ... everything a kid could dream of."

As a senior at Eagle Rock

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High School, Jennifer now dreams of more than chocolate icing. This fall, she'll attend UC Riverside, studying sociology.

"I really want to work with kids," she said. "I just want to be a part of their lives and make that little change like the counselors at camp did for me. Maybe I could be that person they can count on."

Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters is one of 60 organizations receiving financial support this year through the Los Angeles Times Summer Camp Campaign. More than 8,000 underprivileged children will go to camp this summer, thanks to \$1.5 million raised last year. The annual fundraising campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which this year will match the first \$1.1 million in contributions at 50 cents on the dollar.

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