

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

PETER ROWE MISSION: SAN DIEGO

The Pathfinder

Neither difficulties nor a wheelchair will stop Steve Wampler from giving disabled kids a wonderful wilderness experience

March 6, 2005

CORONADO – Elizabeth Daniel's roommate had a job driving a car for a disabled guy. One day in 1994, the roommate asked Elizabeth to tag along. That's how she met Steve.

Right away, Elizabeth saw the wheelchair.

Actually, "saw" isn't accurate. Try "focused on, in an obsessive way." Even when she pried her eyes from the battery-powered contraption, her brain refused to follow.

So embarrassing.

Steve didn't mind. Not because he's a sensitive New Age guy; because he's a No Clue guy. Didn't notice the blushing passenger. Too busy grilling the driver on What Women Want.

Today, he says: "I didn't care about Elizabeth. I was trying to get information about a date I had been on the night before."

She says: "Steve terrified me. Because he was in a wheelchair and had a speech impediment. He broke my heart. Absolutely broke my heart."

Months later, after Elizabeth had fallen in love with Steve, she still struggled with that damn chair.

Then, she said: "I'm just trying to get it. If I could snap my fingers and get you out of this wheelchair, would you like that?"

He said: "No, I'm fine just the way I am."

Really, he is. Stephen Wampler acquired cerebral palsy at birth and his wheels soon after. So? Didn't keep him from graduating from UC Davis. From running a business. Or from opening Camp WAMP (Wheelchair Adventure Mountain Programs) in the Sierra Nevada last summer, a camp for similarly disabled kids. Steve's wheelchair is irrelevant.

OK, "irrelevant" isn't right. Try "a source of inspiration, whether or not Steve likes it."

She says: "Other kids in wheelchairs are watching him. He's doing more work than he knows."

He says: Nothing. It was his turn to blush.



K.C. ALFRED / San Diego Union-Tribune
Stephen Wampler (center) laughed with son Joseph and daughter Charlotte. Wampler's been afflicted with cerebral palsy his entire life – make that, his entire wonderful life. "I'm fine just the way I am," he says.

Under the stars

Steve and Elizabeth married almost 10 years ago. They've formed a tight, supportive team at work, where they plan corporate retreats and conventions, and at home, where they rear their kids, Charlotte, 5, and Joseph, 4.

Cerebral palsy has had 36 years to twist Steve's limbs and thicken his voice. But his quick, witty mind forces you to re-examine notions of "disability." Especially when you notice that his wife is not the least bit protective; she sees him through the eyes of a lover, not a mother. In conversation, Steve and Elizabeth are like a jazz duo who've logged countless gigs together. They pick up on each other's moods, tones, tempos. And they give each other space for the occasional solo.



HOWARD LIPIN / San Diego Union-Tribune
Elizabeth and Steve Wampler (left) welcomed John and Colleen Wynne of El Cajon to a fund-raiser for Camp WAMP, a summer camp for kids in wheelchairs. The camp is held in the Sierra Nevada, where Steve camped as a boy.

In fact, this tale begins with Steve's first solo. He was nine when his parents dispatched him to Camp Nejedly in the Sierra, where Easter Seals ran a weeklong camp for disabled kids.

He says: "They had no idea where I was going, what I was getting into."

She says: "His parents had the most brilliant attitude. So tough. *This is your fate, kid. Get over it. Go out and play.* They are geniuses."

He says: "They are not geniuses."

She says: "They are geniuses."

Sleeping under the stars. Campfires. Nature walks. Skits. Ghost stories. Meeting other kids, all disabled and all unique. Steve loved everything about camp. He returned the next summer and the summer after that and every other summer until he entered college.

Then he got on with his life.

Easter Seals, meanwhile, dropped its Sierra program. Camp Nejedly was still used by the occasional Boy Scout troop and other youth groups, but Steve wondered who would assume the job of introducing the great outdoors to kids in wheelchairs.

Finally, he had an answer. Two years ago, he told Elizabeth that he had to take a leave from their business.

He said: "I need to do this camp."

Elizabeth understood. She said: "It's where the light came on for him. It's where he realized he could do anything."

Last August, he reopened the place, renaming it Camp WAMP. With a golf tournament and several other benefits, he raised enough money for 24 disabled kids from poor families to attend for two weeks.

This year, he intends to send 100 kids, 30 to Camp Wamp and 70 to other camps on the West Coast. All expenses paid.

She said: "Steve's approach revolves around the fact that it is so expensive to raise a handicapped child, he doesn't think you should have to pay a penny."

He says: "I'll need to raise \$262,000. And I'm well on my way."

On Feb. 19, he raised a substantial chunk of this sum by hosting a fund-raiser at the Coronado Marriott. "Camping Under the Stars" was held under a spacious tent, and partygoers paid \$100 each to wear camp-suitable togs, sing camp-worthy songs and enjoy camp cuisine. S'mores, anyone?

Steve's ambitions, though, extend far beyond one camp and one year.

He says: "What I want to get in the next five years is a situation where the foundations are coming to me. The major foundations are very very difficult – if not impossible – to break into. Until they hear about you, you are no one."

The handyman who stuffed envelopes

In Coronado, though, Steve and Elizabeth are well-known.

"They are just remarkable people," says Marlys Simmons, a former Coronado school board member whose daughter played soccer with the young Elizabeth. "They demonstrate how nonlimiting a physical disability can be because of their attitudes."

"Everyone knows Steve," says Tracy Stickel, a philanthropist and self-described "stay-at-home mom" who serves on the Camp WAMP board. "My husband nicknamed him 'The Speedster' because he zips around the town in his wheelchair."

The Wampers are also speedy when it comes to recruiting support. L.R. Moran, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel and family friend, offered to help Steve and Elizabeth with a few household chores. He didn't know that his offer came as the family was gearing up to sell raffle tickets for "Camping Under the Stars."

"I went over there to be a handyman," Moran marvels, "but I ended up being an envelope stuffer."

Word is starting to spread among foundations, too. Recently, Camp WAMP received \$4,250 from the Christopher Reeve Foundation. A San Diego County-based foundation that requested anonymity chipped in \$10,000.

For the last 18 months, Steve has been trying to capitalize on these successes, writing grant applications and consulting with veterans of past charitable campaigns.

He says: "Some smart business people sat me down and said, you've got a great concept, a great idea, but if you really want to attract bigger foundations, you need to expand the idea. You need to involve a larger number of kids."

That's when Steve contacted the Yosemite National Institutes, a nonprofit that hosts outdoor education programs at its three wilderness camps. They struck a deal for summer 2005.

He says: "All we have to do is come up with the counselors and the campers. And the money."

She says: "The Yosemite National Institutes are like the Betty Crocker Seal of Approval. For them to take us under their wing is enormous."

Dan Flanagan, the institute's CEO, said that Camp WAMP is a perfect fit with Yosemite's mission. "We are really committed to diversity – not only social-economic diversity, but also physical diversity."

Still, he cautioned, Steve has to clear several hurdles before Camp WAMP can use institute camps in the Sierra, Marin County and Washington state. "We're hoping that will happen. But that depends on how successful his fund-raising is. We hope it does work."

The scariest road

While Steve is eager to work with the Yosemite National Institutes, a large chunk of his heart will always stay in his first camp, the place that's now known as Camp WAMP.

Surrounded by Tahoe National Forest, the camp lies at an elevation of 6,600 feet beside Hawley Lake. There's an A-framed cabin, but most kids prefer sleeping outdoors on air mattresses. The roofless bathrooms have hot showers, and kayaks and canoes line the lakeshore, but the charm of this place lies in its pristine nature.



Wampler family photo
On the banks of Hawley Lake, Camp WAMP lies inside Tahoe National Forest. Delivering kids to the camp - elevation: 6,600 feet - requires four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Actually, "pristine" may not be the correct term. Try "middle of nowhere, mountain variety."

To get there, campers fly into Sacramento, then board a bus for the three-hour trip to the village of Graeagle. The last 12 miles of this epic trek is with volunteer members of a four-wheel-drive club. They strap passengers into the vehicles and then ascend a goat path through steep passes and around sheer cliffs.

He says: "For the kids, that's part of the adventure."

For adults, too.

She says: "It's the scariest road I've ever been on."

She still has a few anxieties, but Elizabeth Wampler no longer fears wheelchairs.