After finishing her first year at U-M, Movement Science senior Toree Baldwin had planned to spend the summer months traveling and volunteering.

So when Baldwin learned about North Star Reach—a non-profit camp (located on 105 acres in nearby Pinckney, Michigan) for kids with serious health challenges and their families—she applied to volunteer for one week-long session, figuring it would be one of several things she'd do.

“Then I just ended up staying the whole summer, because I fell in love with the kids,” said Baldwin, who grew up in Virginia. “… It was such a phenomenal experience for me. … And I’ve been back the last two summers, so it’s been three years now.”

Lauryn Fairchild, an Applied Exercise Science junior from Clare, Michigan, who also volunteers at NSR, said, “One thing that almost everyone I’ve met at camp has told me is that they get more out of the camp experience than the actual campers, because there is something about NSR, the directors, the staff, and volunteers that creates what we call ‘camp magic.’”

North Star Reach, the brainchild of founder/CEO Doug Armstrong (a nurse and former clinical research director at U-M’s Transplant Center), is only in its fourth year of operation, but it’s already provided a free summer camp experience to more than a thousand kids who would likely never otherwise get to go. (U-M owns the property, and NSR has signed a 30-year lease, at the cost of $1 per year.)

Throughout the summer, six week-long sessions bring together kids with similar health struggles, so there’s a week devoted to kids with transplants, blood disorders, heart ailments, epilepsy, teens with a range of conditions, and siblings of kids with serious health issues. (NSR also offers long weekend family camps in the spring and fall.) Doctors and nurses volunteer as medical staff to provide necessary care (and also engage with the kids in a fun, non-clinical setting), but Baldwin and Fairchild are among those who help run activities and act as camp counselors.

What makes the two Kinesiology students a good fit?

“Certainly their positive attitude, and their willingness to grow, take risks, be silly, and put themselves out there,” said Armstrong. “… I tell people it’s like that Army slogan, ‘It’s the toughest job you’ll ever love.’ The staff is up at 6 each morning, and the kids are up at 7, and after the kids go to bed, the staff...
is up until 11 or 12 at staff meetings, so we’re ready for the next day. You do that six or seven days in a row, when you’re outside in the hot sun all day, caring for the kids’ needs and making sure they’re having a great experience—it’s exhausting. But what I’ve experienced is that it’s also emotionally rejuvenating. We all walk taller after camp. You feel good.”

In many cases, camp at NSR marks the first time that the kids have spent time away from their parents, and while that’s invaluable for instilling in them a sense of independence and agency, it can also be a challenging transition for all involved.

“It’s a huge growth step for the parents and the child,” said Armstrong. “… But that freedom then really translates in so many ways when they go home—once you unlock that door. … I have parents who will call me after camp and say, ‘What did you do to my child?’”

Campers often value the experience so much that they come back—and according to Baldwin, those returning campers often help ease the transition for newbies.

“I had a homesick camper, and these two returning campers, two 10-year-old boys, sought him out and sat down on each side of him like a sandwich at lunch,” said Baldwin. “And then they let him win at gaga ball, and he started to feel better. I mean, I’d had training about stuff like this, but [these two kids] just got it.”

Acting silly and energetic and singing a lot are a big component of Baldwin and Fairchild’s volunteer work at NSR, but there are tougher moments, too.

“During epilepsy [week], all of the volunteers were a bit nervous of the seizures the campers might have, but the doctors and nurses … did such a good job at training us for what to expect … so when one did happen, people weren’t too scared or surprised,” said Fairchild.

“Some questions [campers] will ask—you don’t know the answer,” said Baldwin. “One camper was going to have surgery the next week, and she’s nine years old. That’s so heavy. And all I could really say to her was, ‘You’re an awesome kid, and I’m so glad you’re here,’ and facilitate that conversation, and just sit there and listen.”

Meaningful connections to campers is clearly an integral part of “camp magic,” since Baldwin’s already looking to carve out the space and time needed to keep coming back to NSR.

“This year, I’ll be finishing clinical rotations [for intraoperative neuromonitoring] and taking my last couple of classes and starting the job hunt,” said Baldwin. “And I’ll be looking for a job that will let me take a week off for camp. … It may not be a vacation for everybody, but for me, it’s something that fills me. It exhausts me, but it fills me.”

Lauryn Fairchild and Torre Baldwin at North Star Reach; North Star Reach counselors. Photos: Leisa Thompson.