

Essay:

WHY I NEVER DRINK DECAF COFFEE

In a most figurative sense, I like to give the advice “never drink decaffeinated coffee”. It doesn’t have to do with the distinct, extra-bitter taste of the decaf version, although I am coincidentally not a big fan. What I’m implying, alternately, is that decaf coffee lacks the ability to enhance energy and stimulate enthusiasm. Before I am mistaken for an over-caffeinated crazy person, I’d like to explain that regular coffee can represent a person’s willingness to experience the world. To misquote Ferris Bueller, “Life moves pretty fast. If you drink decaf, you could miss it”.

I developed this philosophy last summer while working as a camp counselor for 5-8 year olds. Out of the 9 weeks of work, they save the very last one to host a program called “Campership”, which includes children from inner-city, poverty-stricken areas. These Campership kids obviously need the most love and attention from counselors, but ironically they are also the most problematic. Without a disciplined childhood and with little or no formal education, campership campers during week 9 often pose a great challenge for our emotionally-drained, tired counselors.

It was during that time last year when I met Destiny—not my destiny, but a cheery young girl from Chicago with naturally blushing cheeks and only one bag. Her parents were noticeably absent from the dropping off process, and it was her nanny that abruptly deposited the child and drove off. I greeted Destiny the same as every other camper I had seen that summer, with a huge smile and a lot of enthusiasm. But I knew that there was something different about this girl from a deep sadness in her, and she inspired me from that very moment on.

In the course of the week, Destiny proved to be an all-star camper. She was up for anything—a rope swing, small hiking trips, crafts—and she made it a point to include everyone in the group. She was polite yet assertive, with a certain eagerness to learn and adapt. It was between activities, in those small blocks of time walking places or after meals, when she would confide things about her life to me. I found out that her parents had been divorced, as many of the children’s were. Her father died several years ago, and her mother was a disbarred lawyer. Destiny had an uncle who had been suing her family for months trying to get her father’s money (they had owned a business together), which would leave her family destitute. She had two sisters, one of whom was at camp as well but was asked to leave for behavior problems, and the other was in rehabilitation for self-mutilation. Her mother left for weeks at a time, leaving Destiny in a small apartment with her sister, who would often engage in the use of various narcotics. Destiny had had to call 911 in desperation far too many times for any human being, yet alone an 8 year old.

What I learned from Destiny will stay with me forever. She accepted her situation and instinctively was, against all odds, responsible and happy. This girl did not drink decaf—she wanted to experience the world even through her immense challenges. I know that she would tell anyone the same advice; Without the motivation and energy to accomplish what you previously thought impossible, you’re not really living life to the fullest.