

**Keith Dow**, *Manager of Organizational and Spiritual Life*, in conversation with **Hilde Wong**, *Karis Family Camp Participant*

Sometimes, a vacation is more than a vacation – like when Hilde Wong and her family applied for Elim Family Camp in August 2024 and were among those selected to participate. As I spoke to her about her experience, she expressed her nervousness about going initially. “We were unsure about what we were getting into!” Camp meant being in a new space with many people she didn’t know, trying to navigate the needs of her family. Hilde and Jason, her husband, navigate the complex realities of life with their two daughters, Evelyn (10) and Janelle (8), who have rare seizure disorders. Hilde realized she was bringing her own fears to the experience. Four weeks prior, their family had a terrible experience where they were discriminated against because of their disability – by people who should have been there for them. She had lost trust in people. “We wanted to close ourselves off to the world.”

Hilde talked to her friend, who had a really good experience at camp. At least there should be good food to eat. It should be okay, right?

As camp approached, everyone in the family was nervously excited. They were warmly welcomed with celebratory cheers as they drove up to Elim chapel. It felt wonderful to meet the volunteers who would be supporting the family. After meeting and talking to them, Hilde felt a sense of relief and comfort. She said, “It was almost shocking to know there are people out there who are so loving and caring who don’t even know us.” It was powerful to be in a place with many families sharing similar experiences.



Reflecting, Hilde was in disbelief about how relaxed she felt at camp. “We didn’t have to carry loads on our own anymore.” Support needs could be shared with people they trusted. For the Wongs, “it actually felt like a real vacation!” Usually, trips with the family mean navigating complex realities, challenging circumstances, and new environments without their usual support staff. This, on top of still needing to cook and clean in an unfamiliar environment. Hilde said most trips are “more challenging than being at home.” Family Camp was the first time in 10 years that the Wong family experienced a real vacation.

In contrast to their previous experience of rejection and exclusion, at family camp the Wongs felt loved and wanted. Volunteers worked hard to give their girls experiences they never would have dreamed of—like tubing on Pigeon Lake!

Hilde was struck by a moment during the last worship service of the week. As an impromptu blessing, people from the community of Elim Lodge formed a circle around family camp caregivers, acknowledging and praying over the difficulty of their paths. This act of solidarity and support, from people they didn't even know, was a powerful reminder of how Christ's love surrounded their family.

Family camps are important so that families experiencing disability can *actually* have a vacation, a break, in a way that many of us take for granted. For the Wong family and many others, family camps go beyond a vacation. Being part of a community that cares for, accepts, and celebrates their children and prays over their challenges is an injection of hope in a world where these families often face rejection and disappointment when seeking help. Family camp gave Hilde renewed “strength to go on through challenges,” and she looks forward to new experiences and adventures at Karis Family Camps. “Life-changing” are not words to be used lightly, but Hilde is convinced that family camp was just that.



Evelyn and Lily (her volunteer) enjoy playing in the sand together.

## Making the Connection

Have you experienced a Karis Family Camp as a volunteer, staff member, or family member? If so, what was your experience like?

Share the good news about Karis Family Camps! Several camps are running in the coming months. Sometimes, a lack of volunteers means we must turn families away. You can make a difference by inviting people to get involved. Volunteers learn valuable skills they bring back to their lives and church communities.

**To learn more, visit [karis.org/familycamp](https://karis.org/familycamp)**