

# Virtual Camp Footprint an Elaborate Video Game That Connects Kids with CMT to Peers

PITTSBURGH, PA, USA, July 27, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Sixteen Camp Footprint counselors and staff will gather at a hotel in downtown Pittsburgh from August 2 to 6 to lead campers on the hunt for "Queen Corona," who has stolen the keys to the real-life Camp Footprint and locked them out. In an elaborate real-life/video game hybrid, some 140 campers from around the world will spend the week looking for clues to the keys' whereabouts so they can get back to sleepaway camp in Pennsylvania in 2022.

This is the sixth year of Camp Footprint, the country's only camp solely for kids with the CMT, a degenerative neuromuscular disease. Just one in 2,500 people has the rare

and incurable genetic disease, which damages the long nerves to the hands and feet, resulting in atrophy in the muscles around them. Kids with CMT have weakness and numbness in their feet and lower legs. It affects their walking and balance and can eventually result in deformity. Like anything that makes a kid different, it can also affect self-esteem.

Children with CMT experience physical limitations daily. For many, walking is difficult and running impossible. Even something as mundane as picking a coin up off a table can be challenging. Kids with CMT are often excluded from PE at school, afterschool sports and neighborhood pick-up games. They are almost always chosen last for team sports.

Sponsored by the Charcot-Marie-Tooth Association (CMTA), Camp Footprint gives kids from 10 to 18 the chance to feel understood and to blend in. Former camper/now counselor Erin Black, 19, explained it this way: "Imagine walking around with a backpack full of bricks for 360 days, but



Camper with her "Camp-in-a-box"

then one day someone tells you that you can take it off for five days and feel free, joyful and empowered. For one week CMT isn't an ugly, painful neurological disease—it's a superpower." In non-pandemic years, Camp Footprint (motto "One Step at a Time") gives kids with CMT a chance to participate in all the regular camp activities like swimming, horseback riding, campfires, and music. Strangers quickly become friends because they share the same physical and emotional challenges.

In 2020, Camp Footprint took place on Zoom, thanks to the CMTA's Camp-in-a-Box, which held everything necessary for a typical camp experience—singing, crafts, drumming, a powder battle, pizza night, a dance and even a traditional campfire, complete with flickering lanterns and S'more Pop-Tarts. This year's Camp-in-a-Box includes coffee mugs with feet and a Camp Footprint onesie for maximum coziness. Zoom sessions will once again run from 9 am to 10 pm, with a break between 5 pm and 7 pm. '



At this year's session, mornings and midday will be normal online camp for all participants, but each evening the special activity will incorporate five clues that lead the seekers from the front of the hotel around downtown and finally to the location of that day's key. To add to the fun, the CMTA created a virtual downtown online map and avatars for each of the 16 seekers so that campers can watch the avatars moving through virtual Pittsburgh in real time using the Find My iPhone app. So, for example, when Camp Director Jonah Berger introduces the first-night's drum circle, a flash mob playing the theme from the Pink Panther on kazoos will disrupt his speech before holding up a series of letters that campers have to unscramble to figure out where the seekers have to go for the next clue.

According to a study published in *Children's Health Care* (Volume 44, Issue 1), camps for children with disabilities provide fantastic social and self-affirming opportunities for campers that just can't be matched outside of camp. The study, *Examining Perceptions of Social Acceptance and Quality of Life of Pediatric Campers with Physical Disabilities*, found that campers' social interaction with other kids with the same disabilities provides enormous support. Study author Doug Knapp, associate professor in the Indiana University School of Public Health, said that the experience allows kids to talk about their common disability "like any normal thing," something they can't even get with their families.

CMT affects approximately 3 million people worldwide, though many of them are misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. The Pennsylvania-based CMTA is leading the fight for treatment and an

eventual cure with an extensive research program, as well as community services like Camp Footprint. Raising awareness of CMT is another key part of the CMTA's mission as early intervention can help prevent some of the deformities that can be part of the disease.

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