

Dr. O'Donnell

December 2, 2020

The Redneck Waterslide: How I (Almost) Broke My Back at Church Camp

By: Sarah McNabb

McNabbS@etsu.edu

*The redneck waterslide was 12 tarps duct
taped together going down a steep, 45-yard hill and
ending in a shallow pond/swamp that had trees
growing around the edge of it.*

Have you ever been so excited to try something only to be let down once you finally do it? Maybe it's a popular rollercoaster at Six Flags that doesn't stand out against the rest of them once you ride it. Maybe it's a place you've always wanted to visit and when you finally do, you realize it's just like any other town. Mine was the redneck waterslide at Camp Jackson, and it let me down in the most tremendous way possible.

My sister, Lauren, and I went to a church called The Bridge in Bristol, Tennessee while growing up and eventually joined their youth group of about 25-35 kids. A lot of my fondest childhood memories come from times I spent with my youth group at the church. Throughout our time with the church, Lauren, and I both were close friends with a tall, red-headed girl named Raynah.

In July, the older kids in the group (8th grade to 12th grade) would go to a week-long summer camp just outside of Nashville, Camp Jackson. The camp was rather large, about 20 youth groups with an average of 20-30 kids per group attended. Every year, the older kids would

come back with amazing stories about their time at camp and Raynah and I couldn't wait until we were old enough. In 2012, we could finally go! During the day, we would do various outdoor activities with other youth groups across the state. At night, we would attend service and on Wednesday, everyone had a free day. Some people would go to the pool, others would play in the field. Most of the campers, however, would go to the hill at the edge the camp to ride what was coined "the redneck waterslide."

The redneck waterslide was 12 tarps duct taped together going down a steep, 45-yard hill and ending in a shallow pond/swamp that had trees growing around the edge of it. On Tuesday night, the camp counselors (usually older teenagers who volunteered at the camp) would lather the slide in copious amounts of soap and blow up all the tubes.

I was super excited to ride the redneck waterslide. For the last several years, I had heard stories about how awesome this slide was. The majority of my youth group woke up at 5:30 Wednesday morning to go. Even in the early morning, the line for the waterslide was extremely long. Half of the group decided to wait in the line while the other half of us decided to just go to the pool instead. I was disappointed, but my friend Raynah had an excellent idea. "You know the waterslide doesn't close down at any point during the day. We should go back over there when everyone goes to lunch at noon!"

Lauren, Raynah and I went to pool and played in the water until 11:45. My sister was feeling hungry at the time and decided she would grab lunch before meeting us at the slide. Raynah and I couldn't wait, we practically ran to the other side of the camp.

Just Before the Accident

"We should ride together!" My friend Raynah exclaimed as we watched a train of five people go down the slide. Her idea to go during lunch worked out really well as the line wasn't

nearly as long. The few people in front of us all rode by themselves and asked the attending guards to spin their tubes as they were being pushed in order to whirl around in circles while going down the slide. Raynah and I were both nervous about going down the slide for the first time and agreed that we didn't want to be spun. When we got to the front, the guard closest to us sat down two tubes at the top of the slide for us to sit in. We sat down in our tubes both facing the slide with me in the front and Raynah behind me. She extended her legs onto my tube and I grabbed them to make a two-person train. "Nervous?," he asked us. Him and his partner looked like they were only a few years older than us.

"Actually, yes. Please don't spin us!" The two guards looked at each other, smiled, and said "Don't worry, we won't spin you."

The Accident

The guards began pushing us to gain momentum. The first push, we moved a few inches. The second push, we slid to the edge of the hill but still came to a stop. They pushed us a third time, and on that push, they spun us.

This might sound dramatic, but from that point on everything was moving in slow motion. We instantly gained momentum going down the hill and only made it a few feet before we detached from each other. I spun around in my tube twice before I flew off of it and was going down the slide on my back, head first. I could see Raynah yelling at me from her tube as I passed her. The thing about a waterslide that is actually just tarps taped together, is that there is no padding to it at all. I hit the first rock about a quarter of the way down and I felt a slight tinge of pain in my back. Halfway down, I went over a pothole and my head whipped forward. Just before I reached the water, I hit a second, larger rock that left my back screaming in pain. I was so focused on the pain that I didn't even notice that I wasn't slowing down once we got to the

water. I skidded across the so-called pond and hit a small tree that was resting on the other side. Finally, I came to a stop.

The Aftermath

The part of the water I landed in was shallow enough for my face to stick out of it. I laid there completely still for a few seconds just breathing. I wiggled my toes and bent my knees. *My legs are okay*, I thought. I then moved my fingers and bent my elbows, *so are my arms*. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Raynah wading towards me. She was grinning ear to ear and giggling. She must've not seen me hit the rocks on the way down. Although my back was throbbing, seeing my friend completely okay made me feel like I was okay. I tried to sit up and wasn't moving. A little nervous, I tried again and experienced the same result. A little panicked at this point, I tried to wiggle my back from side to side. *I can't move my back*.

"I can't sit up. I can't move my back! RAYNAH, I CAN'T MOVE MY BACK!" I saw the smile slowly fade from her face as she realized what I was saying. Horror replaced her once cheerful expression and she bolted up the hill to get help. As she was running up the hill, another train of people came down the slide. When they hit the water, a member of the group broke free and smacked into the side of me. I screamed out in pain! They stood up and looked at me in confusion. "HELP ME! I CAN'T MOVE MY BACK!!" They looked panicked but stayed with me until the guards came down the hill with Raynah.

With every passing minute, my panic grew. I could now feel every throb of pain in my back rippling through the rest of my body. I was surrounded by a group of people repeatedly telling me to stay completely still as I was crying. My anxiety subsided a little when I saw my sister join the group of strangers surrounding me. *Raynah must've went to get her*. However, it

grew back into a full-fledged panic attack when I saw the EMTs carrying a backboard towards me in my peripheral.

The Hospital

If I'm being honest, I don't remember the majority of the hospital visit. I know my sister and one of my youth pastors rode in the ambulance with me, but I don't remember anything that happened in the ambulance. I'm told this is because of my massive panic attack. When we arrived at the emergency room, they gave me a Xanax and I slowly began to calm down. They took an x-ray of my back and, after about an hour of waiting, it came back clear. *Thank God, I didn't break my back.* A doctor and a few nurses slowly rolled me on my stomach to inspect my back. Half of my back was already turning a deep shade of purple. They concluded that while I didn't break my back, I did severely bruise all the ribs on the right side of my body as well as a little bit of my spinal column.

The next step was getting me to sit up. I tried, but I still couldn't sit up on my own. Two nurses sat on either side of me and gently pulled me up into a sitting position. They then laid me back down and had me try it by myself. It took about half an hour, but I did eventually sit myself up. It was incredibly painful, but after a few minutes I felt okay to return to camp.

I moved as little as possible for the rest of the week. The day after I got back, the guards working the slide found me and apologized for spinning me. My mother told me a few years later that the camp immediately contacted her and offered to pay the medical bills in order to avoid a law suit. I spent the rest of the week sitting out of camp activities and my back hurt for about a month following the accident. While the redneck waterslide was a major disappointment to my childlike excitement, I now look back at the experience and laugh about how crazy the whole ordeal was.