Consistency is a word that I have never really felt I’ve been able to apply to my life. Divorce, moving and selling houses faster than we could find a new place to live, loss of jobs, loss of relatives, and a general sense of unknowing is what came with my childhood. There was rarely any consistency; rarely any guarantees for the coming year. Instead each year was different and challenged me in a new way. There was and still is one constant that has shaped me to be who I am today, however, and that is my experiences and memories at Fernwood.

Growing up, going to summer camps was a must. Having two parents that worked full-time jobs meant my siblings and I needed a place to go, which often meant traveling all over for camps. We were fortunate enough that my grandfather only lived minutes away, so Fernwood quickly became a summer staple. Although I cannot tell you exactly what I made each year; who I befriended and what I found in pond study, I can say for certain that the knowledge I acquired has stayed with me. Walking under the thick canopy of trees that line the Ecology Trail, I remember smelling pawpaw trees and spice bush, their distinct scents always a delight. I remember kneeling on the T-dock, gazing with wonder at the painted turtles, hating the smell of decaying leaves but still begging our councilors to throw just one more mulberry into the pond because we were ever-so-confident that the snapping turtle would come out this time. Year after year, walk after walk, the trails at Fernwood became my home; gathering knowledge and experiences as I walked, I knew even then that the woods were my escape.

As times got tougher for my family and I grew older, I had to pause my time at Fernwood. I regret to inform you all that I never experienced a Fernwood overnight as a camper. Those summers I spent away from Fernwood always seemed lacking; I missed the familiar chime of the door when I would walk into the Nature Center. Those summers I did not have a camp volunteer trying to convince me that I should eat an ant as one had many years ago. There were no prairie walks or leaf rubbings or nature Tshirts; those summers felt wrong, empty, and I knew I couldn’t stay away forever.
Flash forward four years and the tall, awkward, brace-face, acne-covered, glasses- wearing pre-high schooler needed something to do for the summer. On a whim, I decided I would email Fernwood and see if there was anything I could do there. Little did I know, had I not sent that email those six years ago, I would not be writing this article today. My email was met with a quick reply from Wendy, kindly telling me she remembered me from camp and that I could be a volunteer with camp. Four months later I had signed up to volunteer for five weeks of camp and was nothing short of ecstatic.

I laced up my tennis shoes, straightened my hair, grabbed my lunch and drove the familiar road to Fernwood with my grandfather. I nervously headed down the path, not knowing what to expect, and slowly opened the Nature Center door when I suddenly heard that familiar chime. I knew I was home. The habitat matching board with the light-up sun remained in its usual spot, the bee hive was buzzing, and it seemed as though every critter in the Nature Center stared at me that morning. I was met with consistency; walking through that door on the first day was like cuddling in a warm blanket, it felt safe.

No week of volunteering was ever the same. I spent the next five years picking up crayons, cleaning recycling, helping crying children, and scrubbing the layers of dried glue off of the tables. Don’t let this fool you though; the weeks I spent at Fernwood were consistently some of the best weeks of my summer. I finally attended a Fernwood overnight and fell in love. Each overnight brought its own unique trials and tribulations as a volunteer, whether it be extreme heat or a severe storm, but this never stopped our fun. Making ice cream, running through the sprinklers, and the night hike only offer a fraction of the experiences we have during camp. We spent hours playing games and goofing around in the nature center and us volunteers often stayed up till three in the morning talking and laughing. One night, we all found ourselves outside and glanced up at the sky to witness a meteor shower. We all laid in the grass in silence and admired the beauty we could not experience anywhere else.

During those five years I learned some of the most important lessons that I would carry with me in life. I learned patience and understanding, cleanliness, organization and so much more. I had never worked with children in that capacity before and had never been granted the opportunity to teach them what I knew. Because of the opportunities afforded to me at Fernwood, I grew as an individual. I gained a stronger sense of self and became more confident in my abilities and what I could bring to the table.

I left for college a week after volunteering last year and I feared that 2015 had been my last year. Boy was I wrong. I received a call mid-December that they needed a new Nature Camp Director and that they would like to offer me the position. My heart stopped. I had never thought of taking a job in education seeing as I am studying chemical engineering, but without skipping a beat I quickly accepted.

I spent this past summer building lesson plans, emailing parents, checking forms and above all else, teaching. My patience was tried, my body was bitten, and my nerves were high, but these things only helped me to grow. I have slept on the floor, I have cried, and I have fallen, however, I got back up. Each and every week I was inspired by the curious faces of my campers and the positive attitude of my volunteers. I learned that I truly have a knack for teaching and that I can handle the pressure of Fernwood losing power during camp or a serious thunderstorm during an overnight.

As my summer comes to a close, I recently found one of my old camp Tshirts that I had made so many years ago and I couldn’t help but stop and think of all that Fernwood has done for me. It has been so much more than a place to visit or a place to go to camp. It has been my safe haven, my joy, my home. The consistency I often lacked in my life I achieved here; I found myself at Fernwood and I grew into the person that I am today because of it.