

## A day at the circus for children from Camp Gung-Ho

[By Susan Abram, Staff Writer](#)

Updated: 07/11/2009 11:35:54 PM PDT



Brian Cross, a volunteer for the Children's Burn Foundation, and Danalee enjoy a dog show as part of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's "Zing Zang Zoom" at Staples Center in Los Angeles on Saturday. (Photo by Jonathan Pobre)

For a few precious hours, the children forgot who they were.

There was too much to see all around: hulking elephants that extended their mighty trunks toward the crowds and tiny poodles that hopped on hind legs, acrobats and daredevils that both mesmerized and thrilled.

Bring in the clowns, and the children from Camp Gung-Ho did what children always seem to do at the circus - smile and laugh.

"We gave them clown noses during one of our sessions and they wanted to come to the circus," said Keely Quinn, program director for the Sherman Oaks-based Children's Burn Foundation.

The nonprofit foundation provides support services and reconstructive treatment to burn patients ages 18 and younger. Outreach is provided to children nationally and internationally as well as at programs such as Camp Gung-Ho.

For years, the camp has offered youngsters the chance to see and make friends with children like themselves. It gives them the freedom to swim and play with others who understand and won't stare at their injuries, some extensively on the face and ears, down their neck and arms.

Camps are often held outdoors, but on Saturday, the nearly two dozen children were treated to a day at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus at the Staples Center.

A majority of the children who attend the camp were burned in scalding accidents. But some are survivors of violent acts, such as Youssif, who was 5 when he was doused in gasoline and set on fire by masked insurgents when he was playing outside his Baghdad home in 2007.

Youssif, whose last name was not released for security reasons, was left with his face disfigured and his hands deeply scarred.

He arrived later that year to receive treatment at the Grossman Burn Center at the Sherman Oaks Hospital & Health Center.

The story of the brutal attack garnered worldwide attention after Youssif's desperate father, who couldn't find anyone to treat his son, approached a CNN crew and reportedly said: "Look at what these monsters did to my boy."

Viewers who saw the news report contacted the Children's Burn Foundation, which helped cover the boy's transportation to the United States and his medical costs.

On Saturday, Youssif sat among thousands of other children, and gleefully pointed to each act at the circus.

Brian Cross, a camp volunteer, was 17 when 40 percent of his body was burned in a chemistry class accident. The teacher asked him to light a match over a flask filled with a highly flammable chemical.

Cross, now 21, was treated by Dr. Richard Grossman, who founded the Grossman Burn Center in 1969. Cross' scars are nearly gone, but he understands how children might feel, which is why he volunteers at the camp.

"As much as these injuries are physical, it's also psychologically hurtful, but these camps help," Cross said. "If you talk to any of these kids who are 6 or 7 years old, it's like talking to a 15 or 16 year old. It's an experience that makes you grow up.

"Hopefully, the kids can see me and know I've been there," he said.