

## **100 Summers: Camp Stella Maris – 1926 to 2026**

### **Chapter 38 – Indiana Cook: The Distance Between Two Homes**

#### **The Distance**

It is winter in Tathra, New South Wales, when summer begins at Conesus Lake. On one side of the world, the Pacific rolls onto an Australian shoreline. On the other, Camp Stella Maris begins to hum with the sound of children dragging foot lockers toward cabins. Nearly 16,200 kilometers—just over 10,000 miles—separate those two places. Roughly forty-eight hours of travel. Two hemispheres. Opposite seasons. Different skies.

And yet Indiana “Indi” Cook speaks about Stella Maris as if it were just down the road.

John Quinlivan did not hesitate when her name came up. “There’s someone whose story needs to be in this book,” he said. He had watched her. Not just her energy—though that was unmistakable—but her posture. At eighteen, she arrived alone from Australia for her first summer in 2024. At nineteen, she returned and was entrusted with leading the waterfront. She informally supported new international staff. She was asked to come back again.

This summer, she will not. “I don’t think I could be any further from Camp Stella Maris,” she says. “Every part of my bone and my body just wants to be there.”

#### **The Decision**

Indi did not grow up dreaming of American summer camps. She had barely traveled. She calls herself a homebody—the kind of daughter whose mother still accompanied her to the dentist. Applying was almost casual at first: An interview, a visa, a flight. Then suddenly she was on the other side of the world.

The first day was overwhelming. New accents. New rhythms. New expectations. But within a week something shifted.

“It was like I was living in a movie,” she says. “It just didn’t feel real.”

Stella Maris is rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition. Indi had attended church perhaps twice as a child with her “Nan and Pop.” The religious dimension did not draw her there, nor did it push her away. When it was explained that Mass was part of camp life, she did not evaluate it. She stepped into it.

“These kids stand there, and this is a big part of their life,” she says. “So I’m going to do it to my best abilities.” That became her posture toward everything.

## **Entering the Experience**

Indi did not arrive asking what camp would give her. She arrived asking what she could give it. She put her hand up for everything—night programs, silly skits, songs she had never sung before. If it was happening, she was in. If it felt awkward, she leaned harder.

“You can’t just walk into an experience and hope that it happens,” she says. “You have to give it your all.”

Her accent made her different immediately. In Peggy’s Café during pre-camp that first summer, a staff member sat beside her simply to listen. “You sound really cool,” he told her. For many, she was the first Australian they had ever met. When campers laughed at the way she said “hey?” she laughed with them.

“If you’re not weird, what are you doing there?” she says now. Weird, to Indi, means real. Unfiltered. Fully yourself. And she made room for others to be the same.

Her first summer, she had a Senior II girls cabin—older girls she initially worried she might not connect with. She set the tone early. “If you come back to the cabin with dry hair,” she told them, “I won’t be very happy.” When it rained, she took them out anyway. They rolled down the hill in wet grass, soaked and laughing, abandoning whatever self-consciousness they might have carried into the week. She wanted them to feel safe enough to be ridiculous, safe enough to be real.

Later that same summer, in the third-to-last week of camp, she had her first boys cabin. It poured rain on the very first day. The boys complained they were bored. “We’re going out,” she told them. “What else are we going to do?” She took them to the amp and they rolled down the hill in the downpour, covered in grass and mud. Afterward, one boy approached her quietly.

“I’ve never done that before,” he said. At the time she didn’t dwell on it. Only later did she realize she had given him a first—a memory that might stay with him for years.

## **Leadership at Nineteen**

Her second summer looked different. At nineteen, she returned as Waterfront Director—not a small responsibility—and also found herself supporting new international staff as they arrived, wide-eyed and uncertain.

One new counselor—“a German boy,” as she called him—stepped out of his car visibly shaken. He was afraid of being different, afraid of what people would think.

“I was so nervous my first summer,” she told him. “You’re worrying too much. Your biggest worry here will be making sure your kids have shoes on before dinner.” She reframed difference as gift. “If you’re not weird, what are you doing here?”

Weeks later he told her she had been right.

She noticed something else as well. Some international staff struggled—not necessarily with homesickness, but with friction. Why do they do it like that? Why do we have to wear shoes? Why is curfew so early? Culture shock invites resistance. It invites comparison. It invites judgment.

Indi chose differently. “That’s how they do it here,” she would say. “We’re here to be part of it.”

She understood something essential: Camp magic is not automatic. It requires participation.

### **Five Minutes**

There is another story Indi returns to often. One evening, a camper named Ruby was in tears. Her counselors couldn’t quite reach her. Ruby asked for Indi.

“I just want five minutes,” Ruby said. “I just want to hear your voice.”

Indi sat with her. Five minutes passed. Ruby steadied. She went to bed. Only later did someone remark on what had happened—the trust, the fact that a child had chosen her as safe ground. Indi hadn’t set out to earn that. She had simply shown up fully, week after week, and something had grown.

### **What She Will Miss**

When asked what she will miss most by not returning this summer, Indi does not mention a title or leadership role. She mentions the first day of camp—standing there as campers arrive and hearing, “You’re back!” Children astonished that someone would travel that far to see them again.

She mentions June 1st—the day she left Australia in previous summers. She knows it will come this year and she will not be boarding a plane. She will stand near the ocean in Tathra, winter wind off the Pacific, and know that across the world the campers are pouring through CSM’s gates.

She says softly. “I still have more to give.” That sentence may be the truest measure of her time at Stella Maris.

## **The Exchange**

Many alumni speak of what CSM gave them. Indi speaks of what she gave camp—her accent, her energy, her willingness to be ridiculous, her respect for traditions she did not grow up with, her presence in the rain, her five minutes.

And in return, something unexpected happened. Home expanded. “I found a home,” she says. “And home found me.”

From nearly the farthest edge of the globe, she entered a small Catholic camp in the Finger Lakes region of Western New York and chose not to resist its differences. She did not measure it against what she knew. She lived into it.

She gave. And in the giving, she belonged.