



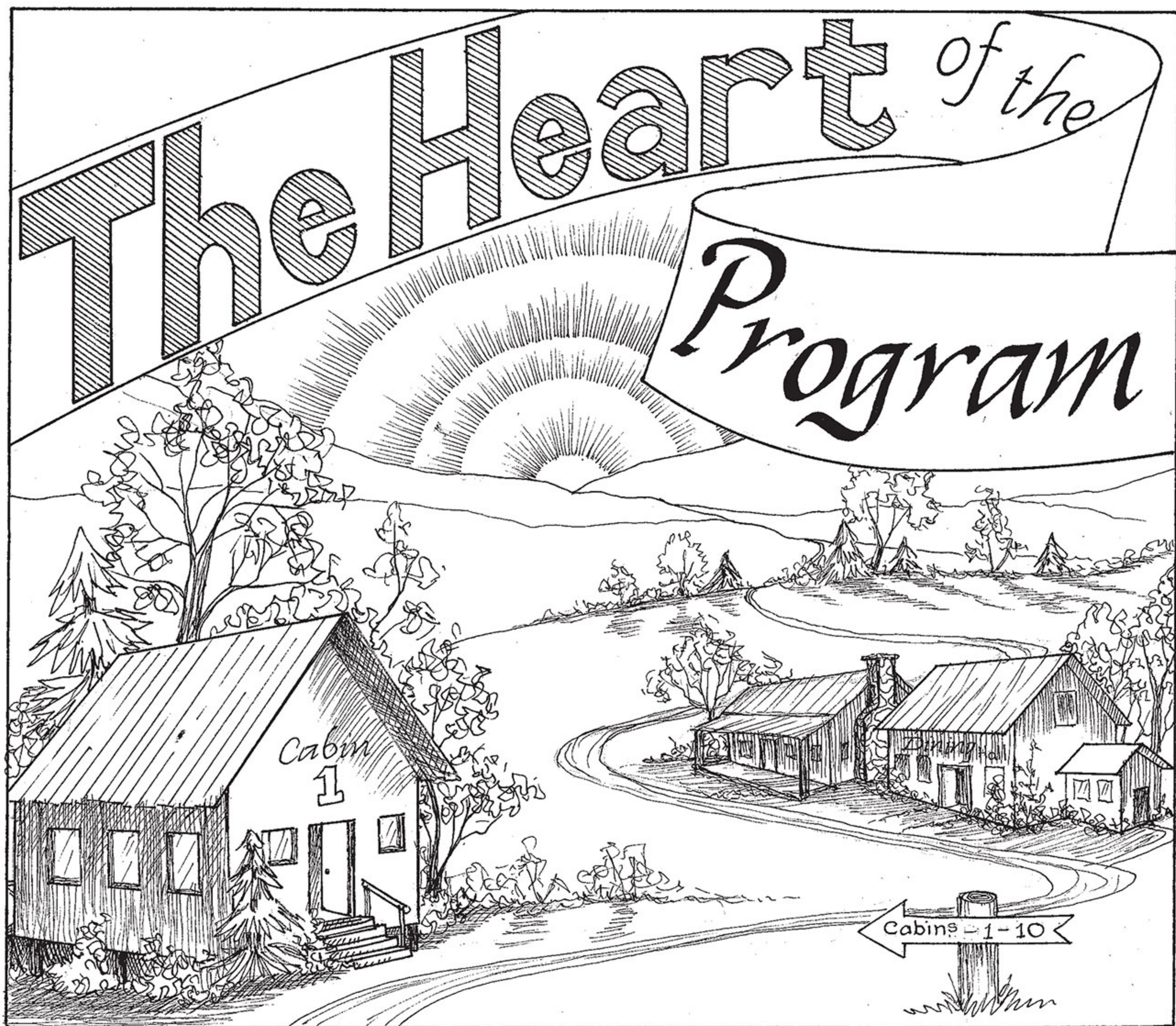
THE HEART OF THE PROGRAM: A GRAPHIC NOVEL

We created this short graphic novel, *The Heart of the Program*, to illustrate—both literally and metaphorically—the social and emotional growth that occurs in the interstitial moments throughout the day at a Residential Environmental Learning Center (RELC).

This novel takes place over several days at a RELC, following participants' thoughts and experiences from their arrival through their final evening on site. While the story is told through the thoughts and words of the participants as they move through various activities, there's another story to discover if you read between the lines—one that connects these common RELC experiences with specific social and emotional (SEL) competencies.

Each day at a RELC presents multiple opportunities for SEL engagement with participants. We hope that this graphic novel helps illustrate the myriad ways youth might experience social and emotional growth within your program. We encourage you to first read the entire graphic novel, then revisit its pages using the “study guide” that can be found at its conclusion.

This graphic novel was illustrated by Debora Cook

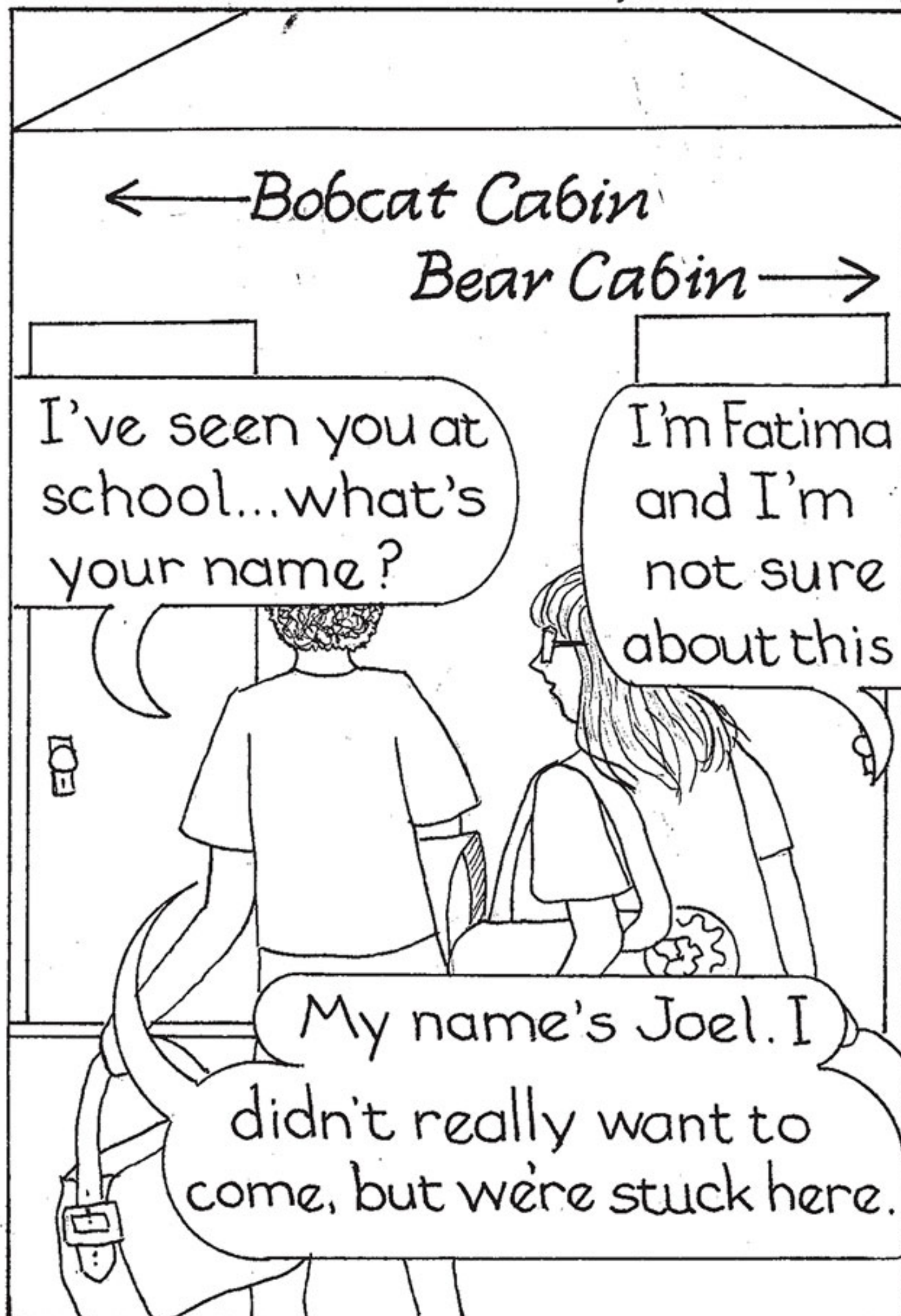


This morning, all across the continent of North America, students are waking up in an unfamiliar but exciting setting. They might see the first sun rays alight on the Maine Coast, or hear the song of a Black-Throated Sparrow in a Utah canyon through the walls of their tipi, or watch the fog move through the forested slopes of the Smoky Mountains. Regardless of where on the continent they awake, these students are all a part of an educational tradition that is intentionally using immersive residential experiences to make lasting changes in their lives. Living in place is what makes this experience more than just a field trip.



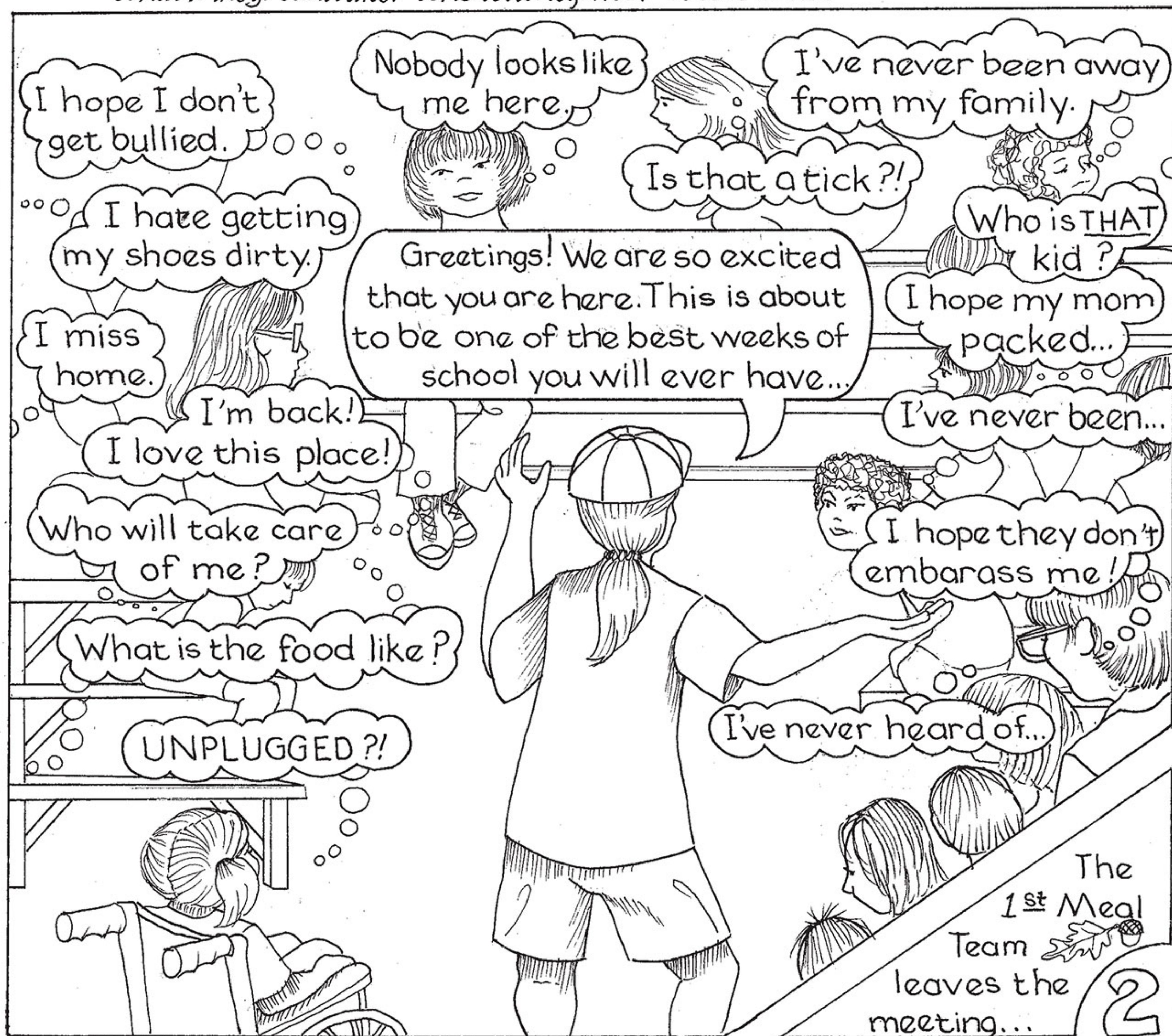


Sometimes, an acorn feels scared when it is dropping to the forest floor.





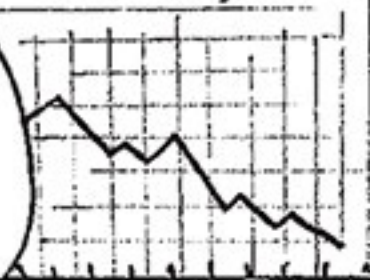
What is the ground like? Who will help me? Will I be ok?





... food prep,
... set the tables,
... get everything served.

Food Waste
Graph



How many
plates do
we need?

Wow, we get
to use cloth
napkins!

So many
glasses!

But maybe it
lands someplace soft,

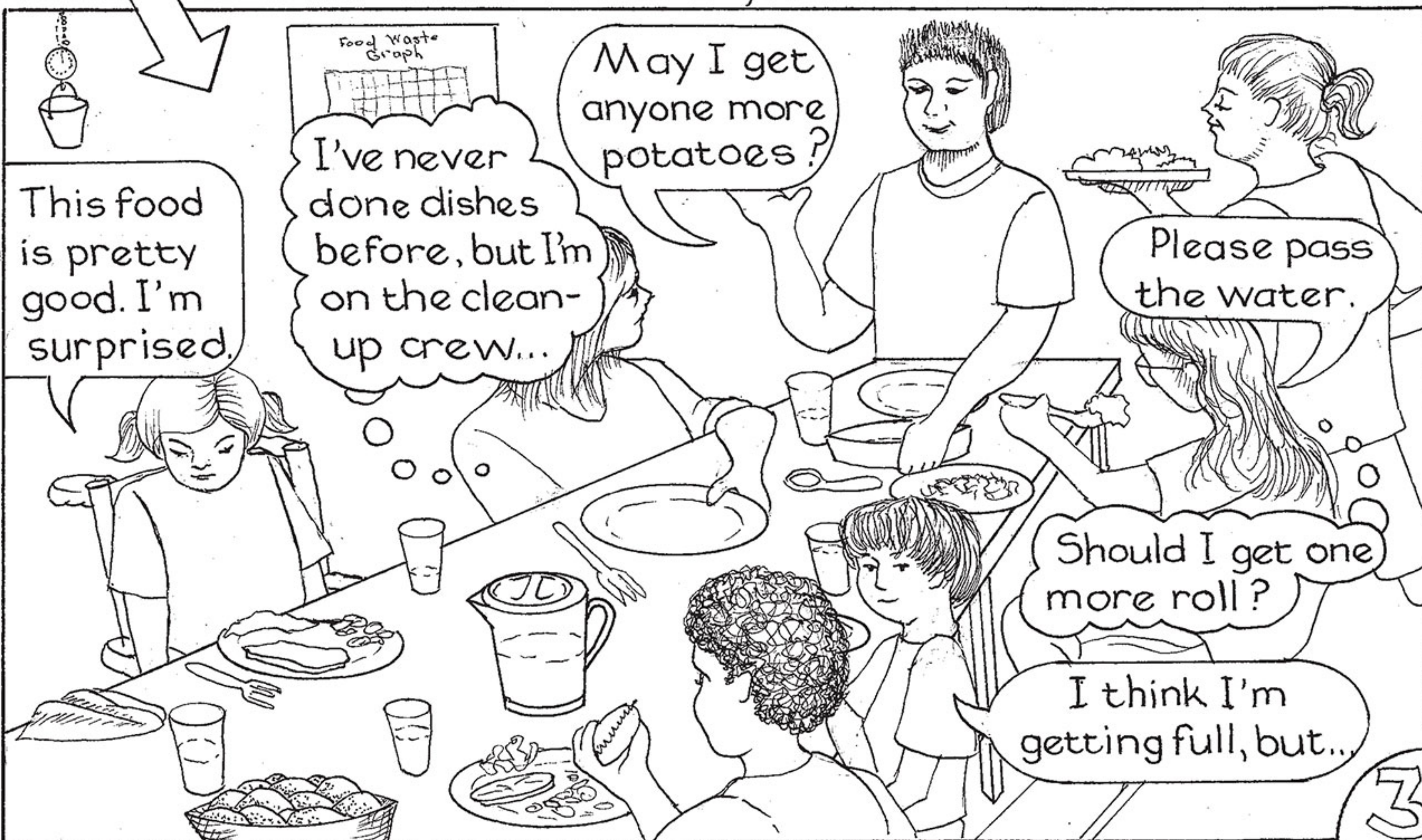
Think about
where our food
comes from.

Food Waste
Scale



We will eat
"family style"... make sure
everyone gets served.

with lots of leaves and moss.



The first meal comes to an end...


with a small group of students staying behind to help clean the dining hall. The rest head for their cabins & settle for bed.

Wow, it looks like my suitcase exploded!

Half of your stuff is over there... by my bunk.

We need to get to bed.

At first the ground is wet, uncomfortable,

During the night, staff members will comfort fears, soothe students who are homesick... and encourage all of them to get a good night's sleep.

Bobcat Cabin

It's too quiet

Bear Cabin

I want my teddy

And the first night is so lonely,

How am I even supposed to make my bed?

The sun rises. Students wake up, & get ready for the day. For many of them, so much is new. They are now learning to take control of their belongings, time management, & so much more.

Did someone move the bathroom from where it was last night?

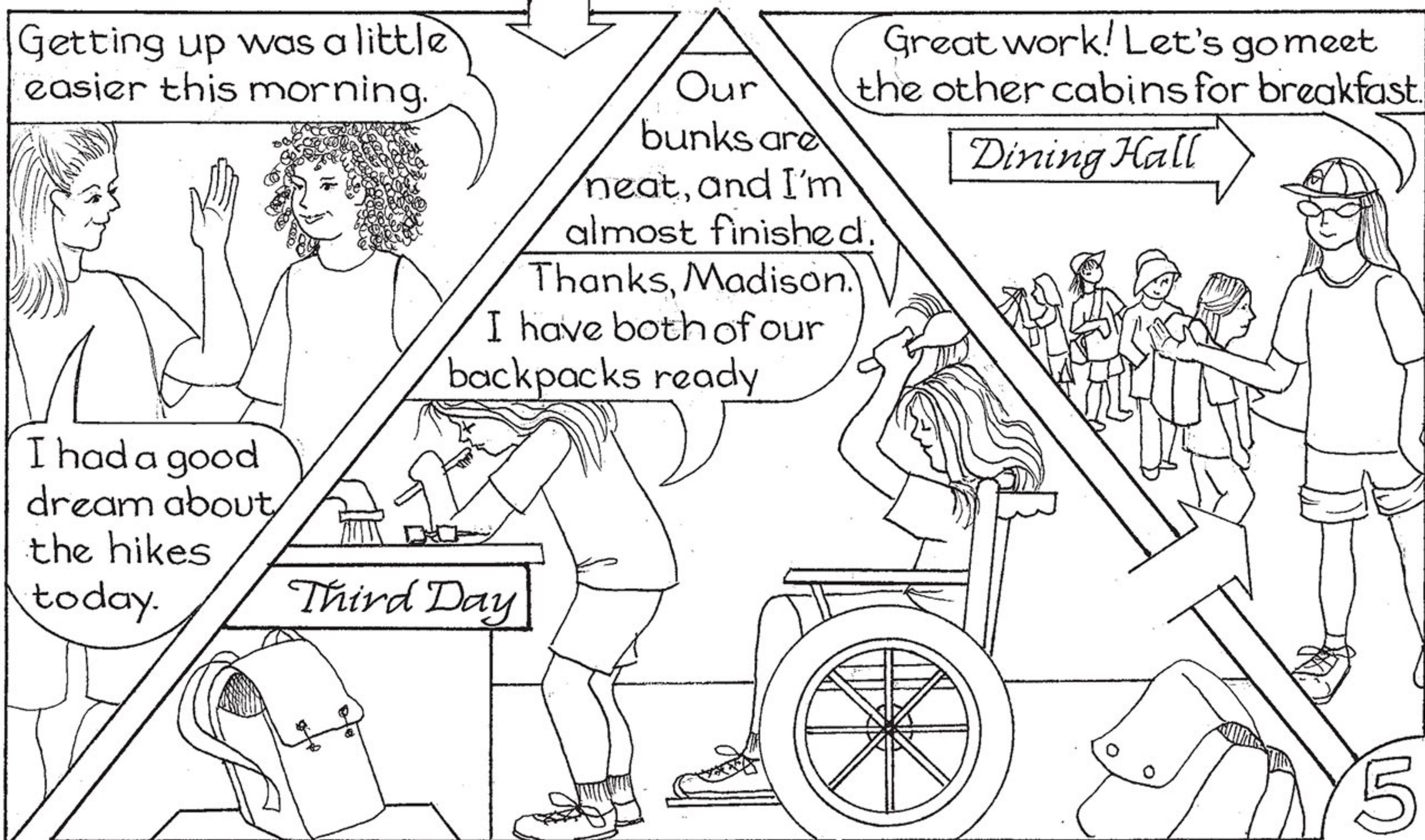
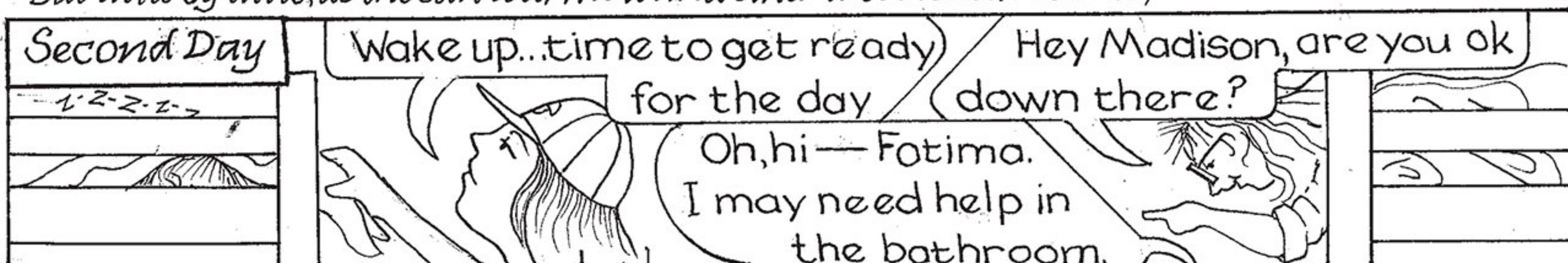
I can't find the floor

Yawn

Someone stole my towel!...never mind, found it!



But little by little, as the sun warms it and other trees watch over it,



Mid-Day...

Day 1

Food Waste Chart

Food Waste Scale

Thank you all for helping us set up for lunch.

What's a good goal we can set for our food waste?

Where are the forks?

I've never had to set a table before.

Do we need napkins

Hi, guys!

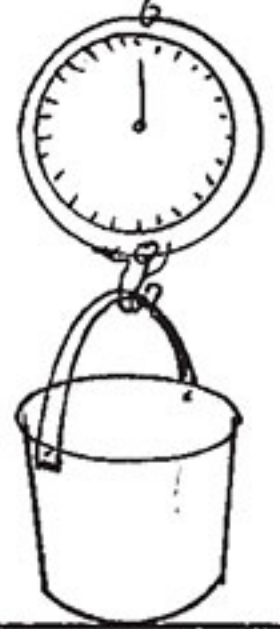
More rolls?

Yea, my mom and sister do this at home

This is a lot of work.

It drinks in rain, finds friends, and maybe it starts to grow roots.

Lets try to do better with our food waste



One day soon it thinks to itself "I'm **Day 2** starting to call this place home."

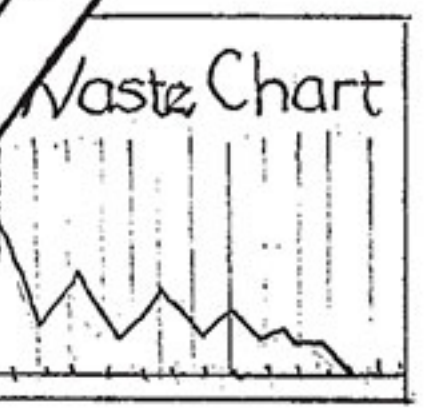
Clean up time ...000ps!!

Please pass the mixed veggies

Here they are.

May I have the water?

...please?



Wow, we got Zero food waste! Right, Joel?

Let me help you with those plates...

They look heavy.

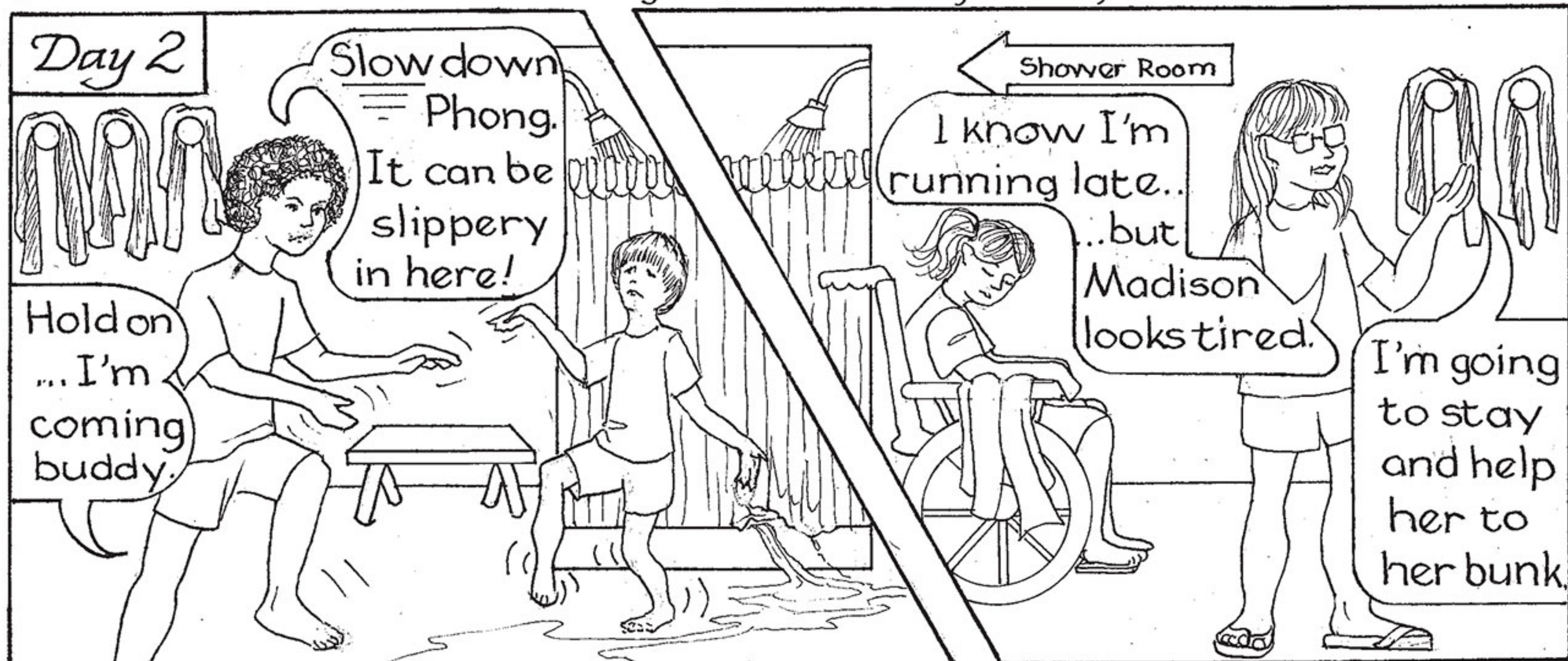
I've got the broom. I'll sweep under the tables.

-Yep!

Day 3



As it uncurls its first leaf



Which gives oxygen for the passing breaths of a bird





Freetime Activities...

So many choices...

Come Back Soon

Want to play basketball?

Maybe later at school. Let's check out the canoes...

Let's build our fort up there!

Look how far you skipped that rock!

Lake

That would be a great place to play camo.

What a good place to read.

Come! see what we found!

How about we just Explore!?

Sounds good!

Soooo....what are we going to do?

Closing Campfire

Ceremony

Salamanders are my new favorite critters.

Learning how to help others was fun..

I have lots of new friends.

Being alone on a solo hike helped me to feel brave.

I liked being able to play outside so much

Who knew science could be so cool!

I wonder what we can do at school to take care of nature.

It feels so quiet and safe here. I was able to try so many new things...

Can we come back next year?

I have so many new inside jokes.

I liked the food - who knew that would happen!

The next time Dad needs help in the kitchen, I know what to do.

When we got here, I didn't want to stay.. Now I can't wait to come back.

I found out my teachers are people too!

"We will take turns talking. Everyone will get to speak...but there are two rules: One - only the person holding the 'speaking stone' gets to talk. Two - the rest of us will listen until the stone gets passed to the next person."

to. never have talked

Who has just now started to sing.

Later that night before lights out

Can I have your email and phone number?

This was the best week ever!

DANCE PARTY!!

Celebrate our great week!

Dance! Dance! Dance!

Woohoo!

I call these dance moves: "The Camp Fire Shuffle"

Bobcat Cabin

Bear Cabin

Let's dance to our new song "The Sleeping Bag Blues"

Let's keep in touch!

The first day back at school is very special. Everyone wants to share their thoughts, and Fatima is reading her poem...

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn

Go ahead Fatima...
Share your poem with us.

Sometimes, an acorn feels scared when it
is dropping to the forest floor.
What is the ground like? Who will help me?
Will I be OK?

But maybe it lands someplace soft, with
lots of leaves and moss.
At first the ground is wet, uncomfortable,
And the first night is so lonely,

But little by little, as the sun warms it, and
other trees watch over it,
It drinks in rain, finds friends, and maybe
one day soon it starts to grow roots.
to call this place home," "I'm starting
As it uncurls its first leaf
Which gives oxygen for the passing
breaths of a bird
Who has just now started to sing.

THE HEART OF THE PROGRAM: A STUDY GUIDE

This “study guide” is intended as a companion for the graphic novel you just read. Before diving in, first reflect on your experience reading through *The Heart of the Program*: How many of the SEL competencies did you recognize during your initial read? Have you seen these reflected in your own program?

The guide below traces the SEL competencies referenced throughout the graphic novel in participants’ words, thoughts, and actions. Each section below correlates with a specific page; after reading through each section, revisit that specific page to see the SEL competencies in action.

Page 1: ARRIVAL

Arrival time at a RELC brings a host of emotions, along with a set of tasks that participants complete as they settle into their new surroundings. During this time, students may practice:

- Self-Management: Taking responsibility for their personal belongings
- Organizational Skills: Unpacking their luggage and organizing their bunk
- Responsible Decision-Making: Choosing to handle all of the tasks that help them settle in
- Social Engagement: Meeting other dorm/cabin mates and choosing a bunk mate

Additionally, some students may also be coping with acculturative stress, as the culture of a RELC may be quite different than their own.

Page 2: WELCOME

At an opening ceremony or welcome activity, those same feelings—excitement, confusion, anxiety, curiosity, and so on—continue to manifest. During this time, students are working through:

- Stress Management: Working through an unfamiliar situation, like being away from home and acclimatizing to a new social situation

A land acknowledgement statement during this time may give space for affirming cultural heritages.

Page 3: MEAL TIME

Meal times provide rich context for SEL. First, students have the opportunity to participate in service roles, which might include table captains, clean up crew, and so on. In doing so, they may practice:

- Communication: Working as a team to serve a meal or clean up the dining hall
- Respect for Others: Helping the on-site community by providing a needed service
- Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy: Helping with chores that they might not have done before, and discovering they are good at these

During mealtimes, participants also have to make multiple decisions around food. This is an opportunity to witness the following in action:

- Identifying Problems: Asking themselves—What choices lead to food waste?
- Solving Problems: Figuring out ways to waste less food
- Impulse Control: Over time, learning to take more wise amounts of food
- Ethical Responsibility: Learning how reducing food waste can help the larger communities of which we are a part

Finally, students have the opportunity to engage with one another and with program staff during mealtimes. Here, they can work on:

- Social Engagement / Relationship Building: Sharing stories, jokes, and conversation with table mates
- Respect for Others: Practicing good manners, making sure that everyone has enough to eat, passing food around the table

Page 4: THE FIRST DAY

The first day can be challenging, as students get used to their new environment. Program staff have an important responsibility to support students as they get accustomed to the site and routines.

Page 5: PREPARING FOR THE DAY

The start of each day offers multiple touch points for experiencing SEL. First, there is ample opportunity to practice self-management as students prepare for the day, where they can utilize:

- Impulse Control: Staying on task instead of, say, playing outside
- Organizational Skills: Gathering and keeping track of needed materials like journals, water bottles, and backpacks

In addition, the morning is a prime time for students to exercise responsible decision-making by:

- Evaluating Natural Consequences of Decisions: Considering what will happen if they forget important items, for example, stream-crossing shoes
- Solving Problems: Considering how to properly pack their bags or locate needed gear

Finally, this part of the day offers plenty of opportunity to practice relationship skills with their bunk-mates and program instructors:

- Teamwork: Cleaning up shared living spaces and helping others with their belongings
- Communication: Asking others—fellow participants and program staff—for help when needed

Page 6: GAINING FAMILIARITY

As students gain familiarity with the systems and structures of the program site, their comfort and confidence increases, they develop more of a responsibility towards each other, and work together to take care of the program site.

Page 7: INDEPENDENCE

Several days into a program experience, students are more comfortable with the new routines and generally demonstrate increasing independence. As the days go on, they often join in new social groupings and are proactive in these relationships, anticipating others' needs and offering help.

Page 8: FREE TIME

“Free time,” when participants are able to exercise decision-making and make meaningful choices, is a program time where SEL opportunities abound:

- Social Engagement: Choosing whether or not to engage in social free time activities like group games
- Identifying Emotions: Checking in with themselves about how they're feeling, and what they would like to do during this period
- Relationship Building: Choosing who they would like to spend time with

Page 9: CLOSING CEREMONIES

Closing ceremonies allow students to reflect on not only academic content, but also their social and emotional development—whether or not they would refer to it in that way! Some of the opportunities during this time include:

- **Accurate Self-Perception:** Taking stock of how their internal dialogue of self might have shifted during the experience
- **Recognizing Strengths:** Thinking back on how they excelled during activities and the experience as a whole
- **Self-Confidence:** Recognizing their abilities in the context of the program
- **Perspective-Taking:** Reflecting on the larger meaning of their experiences
- **Empathy:** Considering the experiences of others at the RELC, and others back home
- **Relationship Building:** Reflecting on the interactions they experienced with fellow participants and program staff
- **Ethical Responsibility:** Making connections between the responsibilities they had during their time at the RELC and how these may translate once back home or back at school

Page 10: BACK HOME

Many school groups take time after the trip to use the student's RELC experiences as a rich context for many kinds of writing, including poems, thank you letters for RELC staff, narratives, and so on. These kinds of extension activities allow for:

- **Self-Awareness:** Labeling one's feelings, practicing accurate self-assessment, and linking thoughts and emotions to behavior