More than two decades ago, Paul Newman had a vision of possibility with no idea how to make it a reality. As all great visions begin, he started with a “What if...” question. What if children with serious illnesses had a chance to just be children and have fun in a safe and nurturing environment? Paul Newman, being a great prankster, could not avoid adding, “...and a place where children could raise a little hell.”

Indeed, there is endless fun while at The Hole in The Wall Gang Camp. Children engage safely in boating, fishing, horseback riding, swimming, archery, crafts, sports and other recreation. There is even a 900-ft zip-line!

Each summer more than 1,000 children between the ages of seven and fifteen, who have been diagnosed with cancer, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia and other serious illnesses, attend the camp in Ashford, Connecticut. Approximately 4,000 children are served through the weekend programs that run from fall through spring. More than half of the children come from low-income backgrounds. All the activities and programs are free and supported primarily by the generosity of corporate donations.

Now, the vision has expanded both within the camp and beyond. There are Campouts, Family Weekends, Parent Programs, the Hero’s Journey, the Alumni Program and the Hospital Outreach program. Hospital Outreach has served approximately 15,000 attendees through the years by bringing “a variety of innovative, creative, fun and highly appealing activities to children in hospitals on a regular basis.” The Hospital Outreach specialists are expertly trained in The Hole in The Wall Gang Camp’s philosophy and techniques. These specialists work collaboratively with hospital staff to enhance, augment and support existing programs focused on improving the quality of life during treatment. The Hospital Outreach Program continues to bring the joy and fun of the Camp’s summer programming to seriously ill children year-round – around the world.

Being part of the Westport, Connecticut community, along with Paul Newman and his wife, Joanne Woodward, and being acquaintances of both, my wife and I had heard about this project for years. While I greatly admired the idea, I never had the opportunity to take Paul up on an invitation to become involved until I was recently asked to kick off the two-day conference with my wellness program, MIND OVER BODY: Harness Vision to Create a Wellness Strategy, at the camp for the Hospital Outreach Conference. There would be a total of 60 specialists from around the world, comprised of 17 sister camps, including Ireland, Great Britain, Italy, Hungary and France.

At the wooden archway entrance to the camp, I was struck by the beauty of the fall day as reflected on the 44-acre lake surrounded by 300 wooded acres, 50% occupied by outbuildings, including a maintenance building, dorms, office and the central cafeteria. There are more than 40 buildings in this space and all are accessible to children who may face mobility issues. The 300-seat, well-equipped theater where I spoke, would be the envy of any Broadway producer.

Mary Naumec, Director of Hospital Outreach and member of the staff, greeted me with the greatest of warmth. After completing my audio/visual set-up, we shared a breakfast in the playfully decorated dining facility where I was introduced to: CEO James “Jimmy” Canton; the exuberant Camp Director Padraig Barry; Chief Development
Officer Ken Alberti; Medical Director Sharon Space; Chief Communications Officer Ray Thompson and former Camp Director and now Founder of the “Hero’s Journey” Program, Matthew Cook, with whom I bonded instantly and intensely.

I love my speaking career and every once in a while, the experience is so profoundly moving that I feel I’ve been presented with a huge gift that I want to share. That was the case with my time spent with The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp.

MIND OVER BODY is a synthesis of lessons I’ve learned from working with leaders and athletes, peak performance coaching and helping patients prepare for surgery, as well as teaching relaxation and visualization technique to achieve wellness. This bundle of information is wrapped in the strategies learned from my own open-heart surgery to repair an aortic aneurism. While the program is full of insightful and fun interaction and stories (including Paul Newman getting me into race car driving), the lessons are profound and deep. I suggest how those in attendance can ramp up their ability to keep a positive attitude in the direst of circumstances and to understand they can use the power of applied imagination to help themselves and others create a vision of wellness.

Keep in mind, every Hospital Outreach specialist faces numerous challenges, including dealing with upsetting situations and striving to keep their spirit renewed. What amazed, delighted and inspired me was their absolute vulnerability and willingness to look inwards, discover, participate and share. It was an electrifying two hours. These courageous and compassionate men and woman are true warriors. They’re on the front lines bringing the hopeful, healing and playful spirit of The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp to children and families. They offer unique, creative and developmentally appropriate activities and interactions to help restore joy and laughter in a time often laden with fear, stress and uncertainty.

If this sounds like a love letter to Paul Newman’s The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, it is. If you are not familiar with the camp, I want you to click on the link below. This is just one of the inspiring success stories available online. Who knows? You might be as moved and inspired as I am and wish to become a supporter of this miraculous vision of hope and wellness. http://ow.ly/CSGUH

James Mapes is a speaker, life coach and the creator of The Transformational Coach™ program, the Mind Over Body wellness program and the Patient Pre-Op/Post-Op Healing Therapy™ CD and program. He is the author of Quantum Leap Thinking: An Owner's Guide to the Mind.