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Camp Casey gives a respite from cancer

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It was hard to tell who was having the most fun at Camp Casey last Saturday - Dakota Davis, who is in remission from cancer, or his three brothers Dylan, Devon and Dallas, or his niece Brittany Baldrice.

As the five youngsters trotted their horses in a line together, each one had a smile brighter than the white riding helmets they were wearing.

The four horses (Sigbjorn, Hannah, Fable and April), and one pony (Star) took it all in stride, for they are part of a regular therapeutic riding program and are accustomed to beginners bouncing on their backs.

Trotting was the best part, all of them agreed, even better than making treats at the Horse Treat Café or learning how to groom Robbie, another one of the 10 horses that live at Therapeutic Riding Inc.

Camp Casey is a free, roving retreat for cancer patients and their families where for one day everyone has a chance to let horseback riding and other fun activities take their minds off of a disease they live with 24 hours a day.

As each youngster was led around the outdoor ring mounted on a horse, Dawn Davis, the boys' mom, watched intently.

"He just loves this," she said of 7-year-old Dakota, who has been in remission from leukemia for five years following treatment at Rose Cancer Center in Royal Oak.

She said Dakota participated with his brothers in Camp Casey in July, and when its founder called to say there were last-minute openings for this session, the four boys and their niece jumped at the opportunity to participate.

"He had a great time," Dawn Davis of Troy said, adding that Dakota loves to wear his camp shirt when he's not at camp.

"He wears that shirt at least twice a week," she said.

Brittany said she'd never been on a horse before but "Dakota had such fun the first time that when he said he wanted me to come, I didn't have to think twice."

What makes this camp special is not only its purpose - "helping kids conquer cancer one neigh at a time" - but its scope: the entire family.

Molly Melamed is the founder of Camp Casey. She began the one-day camp for kids with cancer and their families as a tribute to Casey Foote - a little girl who died from bone and brain cancer in 2003.

When she was a student at Michigan State University, Melamed saw the positive effect horses had on Foote, and organized what she thought would be a one-day tribute to the little girl.

Following that camp, she said she got a letter from a young man thanking her "for the best day of my life." It's been four years and hundreds of kids later, and now Camp Casey has five traveling horse camps at different locations around the state.

The camps tend to gravitate to areas near cancer centers, Melamed said, such as Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor.

Last Saturday, there were about 20 campers at Therapeutic Riding, a stable in Ann Arbor.

All of them took part in horseback riding and had mini lessons in horse grooming and treat making. There was also an arts and crafts session, a treasure hunt and games. The campers had caricatures drawn, had photos taken with a special guest and made tie-dyed T-shirts.

Camp Casey is made possible by donations and fund-raising, Melamed said - and through the kindness of horse stables with kid-friendly horses and ponies.

In addition, she said, the camp has many dedicated volunteers who attend the camps and provide help.

"They get involved and keep coming back," she said.

For more information about Camp Casey go to: www.camp-casey.org.

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