

For kids sick with cancer, Horsey House Calls can be what doctor ordered

BY ALEXANDRA BAHOU • FREE PRESS STAFF
WRITER • April 27, 2010

Moe stood patiently in the barn at Pine Meadow Ranch in Novi. Overcast skies and rain in the forecast could mean a cancellation.

“Let’s just go,” Lauren Maiman, director of public affairs for Camp Casey said to Equine Director Amy Gill, the two debating whether wet conditions would ruin their special delivery.

That special delivery: Moe, a chestnut-colored, 14-year-old quarter horse with big brown eyes and a mellow attitude.

“Hey, Moe,” a girl said as she wrapped her arms around his neck before heading out of the barn.

“He’s great with kids,” Maiman said. “He has the perfect temperament for children.”

Moe was scheduled to visit 2-year-old Trista Kirby of Taylor in what Camp Casey calls a Horsey House Call. Trista was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in October. And a cancellation would mean rescheduling the day of fun when Moe’s hoofs wouldn’t slip on wet pavement.

Maiman and Gill, with hopes that the weather would clear, decided to take a chance and loaded the donated horse into his trailer. They set off to make a lasting impression on a girl and her family with the first Horsey House Call of the season.

One neigh at a time

Horsey House Calls are a two-hour event where Camp Casey volunteers bring a horse, food and crafts to the front door of a child with cancer. The organization has 20 regular volunteers and plans to do at least 12 house calls this year. They are just one of the services Camp Casey provides for children with cancer and their families. Other programs are Cowboy Camp Outs, mini-overnight vacations on a horse ranch, and Outlaw Outings, where volunteers take children to sporting games and other events.

Molly Melamed started the nonprofit horseback riding and outreach program in 2003, inspired by Casey Foote, a girl who battled cancer and loved horses. Casey passed away just shy of her 13th birthday in 2003. Afterward, Melamed worked on creating an organization that lives up to its slogan, “Helping kids conquer cancer one neigh at a time.”

“It gives them a sense of empowerment to be in control of this horse,” Maiman said. “We’re hoping that sense of empowerment and control can be instilled in them because everything in their life is so uncertain at the time.”

A four-legged visitor

In Taylor, the Kirby family anxiously awaited the arrival of their four-legged visitor. Their 2-year-old daughter had been talking about wanting to ride a horse for weeks after seeing one in an episode of Pee Wee’s Playhouse. The horse call was going to be a surprise.

Trista’s battle with the cancer has done little to

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squash her playful spirit.

"She's been riding Buddy, our lab," said Todd Kirby, Trista's father. "She's been bugging us to ride a horse for some time now."

Moe walked up the sidewalk to the front steps, and Trista's mother, Kristen Kirby, carried her out on the porch followed by the rest of the family. Everyone cheered, but Trista looked confused.

"At the beginning we were a bit skeptical," Kristen Kirby said. "She was excited, but unsure at first."

Confusion was soon replaced with joy as Trista began to realize that what she had wanted for so long was finally here, eating grass in her front yard.

"I gonna ride Moe!" Trista beamed as she watched her siblings take turns riding him down the street.

"She's the one who keeps me going through this," Kristen said.

Trista's family members were glad to see a smile on her face and enjoying the day with her other siblings.

"I am so grateful to have someone like Trista in my life," said Chelsea Kirby, Trista's 14-year-old sister. "If I could take her place and deal with what she has to do at the hospital, I would."

Trista's turn

After her family members had their turn, the last ride belonged to Trista. As the Camp Casey volunteers set her in the saddle, she held on with all her might, expressing both excitement and fear.

"Okay, Trista, now say 'Walk on, Moe!'" Gill said.

"Walk on, Moe!" Trista shouted in a high, breathless voice. Her family looked on, laughing and wiping away tears as their girl rode Moe down the neighborhood block.

"I think it will help erase the bad things she had to go through," Kristen Kirby said. "She will just remember that people loved her and didn't really even have to know her."

A faint "Good-bye, Moe" could be heard from Trista as the trailer carrying the horse rolled away.

"I'm going to have to buy her one, you know that, right?" Todd said to his wife. "We'd need a bigger yard with more grass."

Contact ALEXANDRA BAHOU: 313-223-4543 or abahou@freepress.com



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Two-year-old Trista Kirby of Taylor gets ready to ride off on Moe, a 14-year-old quarter horse gelding, at her family's house on Saturday. (BRIAN KAUFMAN/Detroit Free Press)

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Camp Casey volunteers guide Moe while equine director Amy Gill holds Trista steady. Trista has leukemia; having a good time with the horse "will help erase the bad things she had to go through," her mom, Kristen Kirby, said.

How you can help

To donate to Camp Casey or Horsey House Calls, contact Molly Melamed at 248-705-2780 or go to www.camp-casey.org.

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