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Camp offers free fun to kids with cancer

Lori Holcomb
The Enquirer

Though she only came up to the horse's knee, Caroline Thomas was especially careful to not hurt the gelding as she brushed its long, coarse tail.

The 5-year-old smiled up at the appaloosa, whose scarred right eye socket marks where an infection claimed its eye. The long scar on the back of Caroline's neck shows that, like the horse, she's fought a number of battles in her short life, but is still winning.

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Caroline is one of 10 children to participate in Camp Casey's horse camp at Windsong Stables in Battle Creek. The Lansing-based camp travels to horse stables around Michigan providing free day camps to any child who has had an experience with cancer.

"Horses have amazing emotional and therapeutic effect on people of all ages, particularly with

children," said Jessica Hare Moore, equine and safety director. "A lot of kids, after going through cancer treatments, seem to lose self-confidence because they lose their hair or are teased by other children. But when they're working with animals so much larger than them and they have control, horses give them confidence to have strength and power again."

Caroline has undergone 30 radiation treatments in the past year and had a golf ball-sized tumor removed from her brain in October. She just finished three weeks of chemotherapy and was feeling a bit sluggish, but her mother, Mabel Thomas of Lansing, said Caroline was more energetic at the camp than she has been in a long time.

Camp Casey was founded four years ago by Molly Melamed, who witnessed firsthand the therapeutic effects of horses on cancer patients and their families. By working with donations, volunteers and local organizations, Camp Casey provides a one-day camp for children and their families, free of charge.

The kids typically take riding lessons, make keepsake crafts and treats for the horse, learn to groom and play games at the camps. This particular group was very fortunate, however, because Thumbelina, the world's smallest horse, made a stop on her national tour at the camp.

"She has an extraordinary connection with kids," said Michael Goessling, owner of the 57-pound miniature horse. Goessling is taking Thumbelina across the country to visit sick children while raising \$1 million for children's charities. Standing at only 17 1/2 inches tall, Goessling said the tiny equine has huge healing effects.

"These kids have a lot of rough days," he said, "but its amazing how she has the ability to make it all OK, even if it's just for a short time."

For more information on Camp Casey, visit www.camp-casey.org.

Lori Holcomb can be reached at 966-0675 or

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Doug Allen/The Enquirer

Camp Casey campers, counselors and Michael Goessling, right, Thumbelina's owner, gather to pet the World's Smallest Horse on Saturday at Windsong Stables on Sonoma Road.

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