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Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

Camp Casey attendees Sarah Greenwald, left, Jessica Gougeon of Sterling Heights and Ragan Chick of Redford feed Mack the horse watched by wranglers Jennifer Buckley and Jerry Rzeppa. The program aims to take kids' minds off fighting cancer to focus on fun.

Plymouth

Kids trade hospitals for horses

Traveling camp gives cancer sufferers a fun diversion

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

PLYMOUTH -- Four-year-old Mary Kate Cullen surveyed the world at her feet from atop a big brown horse at Willowbrooke Farm, near Plymouth.

Too often, her vantage point has been from a Beaumont Hospital bed, where pediatric oncologists have prodded and poked her. But not this time.

"I feel like a giant!" said Mary Kate, of Redford Township, whose short re-growth of dark brown hair was hidden snugly under a riding helmet.

Mary Kate is among about 200 kids who will benefit this summer from a day at Camp Casey, a traveling day camp for children with cancer and their families. Nineteen participated at Willowbrooke on Saturday, along with about 30 parents, siblings and friends.

The free camp provides a day of carefree abandon to children who have had more than their fair share of suffering in their short lives. Many have been sheltered from the company of other children, to protect them from

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Camp Casey

A free traveling day camp for kids with cancer. Kids are referred by their doctors or hospitals. For information, call (248) 705-2780 or visit www.camp-casey.org.

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infections, and kept from rough-and-tumble activities most kids take for granted.

"Anytime she has a fever of 100.5 we have to take her in to the hospital, because that means her body's not fighting what's going on," said Cara Cullen, 41, of Mary Kate's leukemia, diagnosed last August.

The camp was founded in 2003 by Molly Melamed, a then-college student at Michigan State University who taught horseback riding to earn spending money. One of her students was a 12-year-old girl named Casey, who suffered from bone and brain cancer.

"She died that summer, and I was devastated," Melamed said.

"I wanted to do something, so I thought, 'Let's put together a one-day horse camp so other kids with cancer can experience this.' "

Melamed approached the pediatric oncology staff at Lansing's Sparrow Hospital, who agreed it could be therapeutic for some of their patients. Then she asked the owners of a horse farm to donate their facilities and horses for a day.

The camp will be at three more locations this summer: a stable near Lansing on July 14, one near Ann Arbor on Aug. 11 and another in Davisburg on Sept. 22. "These kids spend so much time in hospital beds with people sticking needles in them," said Keith Chick of Redford Township, as his 5-year-old daughter, Ragan, gently brushed the coat of a big bay gelding Saturday. The little girl will be finished with her course of chemotherapy for leukemia in eight months.

"You want to build in as much fun as you can, to get their mind off of it."

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