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Horsing around

Young cancer patients find reason to smile at Camp Casey

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by Sharon Dargay

ADVERTISEMENT MIRROR STAFF WRITER

Molly Melamed knew undeniably that her nonprofit organization was fulfilling its mission when she overheard a conversation between two young beneficiaries.

"One little girl was doing an arts and crafts program. She said, 'Having cancer is a pain, but there are so many perks.' It put it all into a nutshell that Camp Casey was doing its job. Camp Casey makes children feel special."

The 26-year-old Ferndale woman was a freshman, studying journalism at Michigan State University, when she laid the groundwork for the organization that offers overnight and daytime horseback riding camps to children with cancer and their families.

Melamed, who grew up in Farmington Hills the middle child of three sisters, had started teaching horseback riding at a nearby farm "to earn beer money" while at MSU. It was there that she met Casey Foote, an 11-year-old girl who found joy riding and grooming horses during her battle with brain cancer.

"She was not one of my students, but she had a presence at the barn," Melamed said. "She was a spark plug. We all knew she was going through chemotherapy. She made a strong effort to come to the barn. She'd schedule surgeries around riding. Toward the end of her life, we ended up bringing a horse to her house. Her family liked seeing her so happy."

A TRIBUTE

After the girl died, just short of her 13th birthday, Melamed, then an MSU sophomore, and other instructors at the farm honored her memory with a day of horseback riding, crafts and [entertainment](#) for 20 area youngsters who were undergoing treatment for cancer.

"It was going to be a one-time event," Melamed said. "A week later, I got a letter from a little boy saying, 'Thank you for the best day of my life.' So we did it again in July and then again in August."

She continued the events through her college years, giving them an organizational structure by forming the nonprofit "Camp Casey." Although she graduated with journalism training, Melamed knew a traditional broadcasting, print or corporate career would leave no time for the Birmingham-based camp. She started waitressing instead and "made it work," continuing the camp experiences, fund-raising and writing grants.

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LEARNING THE ROPES

ADVERTISEMENT "If I didn't know how to do something, I would surround myself with people who did. Six years down the road, I'm now paid as staff and I have two other paid staff members. It's not a full-time gig for any of us. But it works better to have a (part-time) three-person staff than one person full time," said Melamed, who also teaches pilates in Bloomfield Hills. "We have an active board of directors. We have a post office box in Birmingham, but we all work out of our homes. We hold board meetings in my basement. It keeps the overhead low. We've learned to run the [business](#) like college kids would. We cut corners and don't spend money where we don't have it."

Camp Casey will offer two overnight retreats this summer, holding the first in early June at Black River Farm and Ranch near Port Huron. Families interested in attending one of the free camps can fill out an application online. The organization also receives referrals from hospital pediatric oncology departments statewide.

"The participants are in different stages of treatment. It's wonderful to see how their parents communicate with each other and ease each other's anxieties," Melamed said. "I also think horses are a healing animal."



Camper Devon Niemiec makes a new friend at a Camp Casey retreat, held in August 2008 at Double JJ Ranch in Rothbury.



Molly Melamed of Ferndale, formerly Farmington Hills, plays an ice breaker game with Luke Lalonde and Dallas Davis at a 2007 camp in Ann Arbor.

WILD WEST TRAIL RIDE COOKOUT

What: A fund-raiser for Camp Casey's Horsey House Calls program, which sends "Moe" the horse to the homes of children who are too sick to attend an overnight or daylong camp.

When: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, May 2

Where: Mayberry Riding Stable, 20303 Beck, Northville
 Tickets: \$40 per person includes 40-minute trail ride, lunch and entertainment. Non-riders can buy a \$15 lunch-only ticket. Children 7 and under pay \$15 for a pony ride and lunch. Ticket deadline is Thursday, April 30. Reserve tickets at [www.Camp-Casey.org](#)

Details: All riders must weigh less than 240 pounds. Trail rides head out hourly, rain or shine. Grills fire up at 11:30 a.m. and cook all day. Live music and western games, such as learn-to-lasso and horseshoes.

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HOUSE [CALLS](#)

The organization's upcoming Wild West Trail Ride Cookout will raise funds for its newest program, Horsey House Calls, which sends "Moe" the horse to the homes of youngsters who are too sick to travel.

A Farmington Hills girl and her older sister were the first to experience a surprise visit.

"There are no words to describe it," said her father, who spoke on the condition that his family remain anonymous. "We had them (his daughters) answer the door and there was a horse standing on the front porch with his head in the foyer. They were thrilled. They rode the horse around the backyard. They groomed it. They did arts and crafts. It was terrific."

The group offers Horsey House Calls twice a month. It also runs one-day family outings throughout the year to baseball games, the zoo, pumpkin patches, hay rides and other activities.

Camp Casey's wish list includes equine supplies for "Moe." Check out its Web site at www.Camp-Casey.org for information about donating, volunteering and becoming a camper.

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