



Adam Cohen of Royal Oak, Lauren Maiman of Beverly Hills, Camp Casey founder Molly Melamed of Ferndale, Katherine Green of Ferndale, Moe, and equine director Amy Gill of Ferndale

Bucking Cancer

Young patients get a chance to take the reins.

Judith Doner Berne

Special to the Jewish News

Molly Melamed has had a love affair with horses since she was 10 years old.

She spent summers on horseback at Black River Farm and Ranch in Croswell, Mich., first as a camper and then as a counselor.

Even as a journalism student at Michigan State University, Melamed taught riding at a nearby farm.

That's where she came into contact with 11-year-old Casey Foote, who also had a special feeling for horses — but it was as she battled bone and brain cancer.

“Until her final days,” Melamed says, “Casey sought emotional relief from her illness by riding and grooming her favorite horse, Brandy.

“When she passed away at age 12, I knew that I could use the skills I learned at Black River to organize a program for kids like her.”

Originally, “Camp Casey” was designed to be a one-time event where children with cancer and their families could horseback ride and enjoy horses the way Casey had, says Melamed, who is now 27.

But after hearing one camper call it “the best day of my life,” Melamed, who grew up in Farmington Hills and graduated from Walled Lake Western High School, considered whether Camp Casey could develop into more than a one-shot experience.

When she returned to Metro Detroit after graduating

from MSU, “I decided to try my hand at fundraising to keep Camp Casey running. Now we reach over 200 kids a year.”

Horse House Call

That's how 3-year-old Will Pennanen, diagnosed with leukemia in May, found himself on the back of a horse named Moe on a July Saturday right in his own backyard.

“After 10 weeks of treatment, all the leukemia cells are gone,” says his dad, Paul Pennanen, as he waited at their Oxford home for a “Horse House Call,” one of the ways in which Camp Casey serves children with cancer.

Over the next few hours, Will took several turns atop Moe, following the lead of his brother Jack, 5, and assorted cousins. They were led by Camp Casey staffers Lauren Maiman, a Beverly Hills resident who works at CKC Publications in West Bloomfield, and Amy Gill of Ferndale, who works at Bizdom, a Detroit nonprofit.

Both have been Melamed's friends since they met as riding counselors at Black River.

Maiman, who handles community relations, and Gill, who is equine and safety director, are paid. Melamed says, “It covers their expenses. Katherine and Adam are volunteers.”

She was referring to Adam Cohen, an executive recruiter who lives in Royal Oak, and Katherine Green, a real estate agent from Ferndale, who were keeping the kids busy on a craft project and serving pizza and drinks when it wasn't the kids' turn to ride Moe.

“Molly started Camp Casey and I wanted to be a part of



Dana, Will and Paul Pennanen of Oxford

it,” says Green, who also serves on the organization's board. “I love going on the outings. It's great to get my mind out of the office and be with horses and kids.”

For Cohen, who has been involved in Camp Casey fundraisers, this was the first time he had worked an outing. “I'm really fascinated,” he said. “I've watched Molly grow this for a long time.”

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