



'Horse show with heart'

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Mid Michigan Hitch Classic sets sights on helping children with cancer

ALLEGAN -- It was a colorful display of equine expertise combining power, beauty, style and grace. The first day of the Mid Michigan Hitch Classic Friday afternoon at Allegan County Fairgrounds provided an arena for horses and horse owners to exhibit the characteristics that make show horses worth showing.

The second annual show, which wraps up at 9:30 a.m. today, also is a way to raise funds for a cause that allows their therapeutic value to come to fore. Proceeds from the Mid Michigan show will go to Camp Casey, a traveling day camp that serves as a horseback riding retreat for children with cancer and their families.

"Last year we were a first-time horse show," said Kate Johnson, 56, co-chair of the show, along with her sister, Cindy Walburn. Johnson spoke as Draft horses, Haflingers and Dutch harness horses took turns kicking up dust during gallops around the grounds.

"This year, we've found a cause," Johnson said. "We're a horse show with a heart."

Camp Casey is based in Birmingham and was founded in 2004 by Molly Melamed after one of her horseback riding students, Casey Foote, died of bone and brain cancer when she was 12. Melamed, a 25-year-old Michigan State University graduate, says Casey loved horses and would have enjoyed seeing children and their families interact with them during a day of camp.

"The children and their families don't go on pony rides at Camp Casey," Melamed said. "They really learn to ride horses. They get lessons, go on trail rides and learn horsemanship."

Horses provide therapy for sick children, according to Melamed, giving them a sense of control at a time in their lives when they need it most.

Camp Casey is funded through local donations at the locations it visits.

"Kids with cancer are losing control of their bodies, of their emotions, mom and dad are crying, family life isn't the same when they are sick," she said. "At first, most of the kids are intimidated by the horses, but after they learn to ride, they

HOW TO HELP

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

To donate to the Mid Michigan Hitch Classic's Camp Casey fund, write a check payable to the Mid Michigan Hitch Classic, and write "Camp Casey" on the memo line. Mail the check to Mid Michigan Hitch Classic Camp Casey Fund, 2952 30th St., Allegan, 49010.

To assist in the effort to bring a Camp Casey to Allegan, call Kate Johnson at 269-793-7382.

feel in control.

"It is a sense of command, of accomplishment, that empowers them."

Melamed estimates that more than 1,200 sick children and family members have visited the traveling horse experience since Camp Casey began making its rounds through Michigan. Melamed has trailered horses to Lansing, Plymouth, Ann Arbor, Goodrich and other Michigan cities.

Camp Casey has traveled as far west as Battle Creek -- having visited in 2007 and earlier this year -- but that's as close as it has come to making a stop in Allegan.

Organizers of the Mid Michigan Hitch Classic would like that to change.

"If we can raise enough money, we'd love to have Camp Casey come to Allegan," Johnson said. "In the meantime, all the money we raise will go toward helping children with cancer in this area and others attend any camp they can."

Depending on the size of the camp, and the number of children and family members who participate, anywhere from \$3,000 to \$5,000 must be raised before Camp Casey can be held.

The donations are collected prior to the camp, and usually come from local businesses. Five, \$1,000 donations is what most campsites shoot for, according to Malamed. All camp participants -- up to 20 sick children and their families -- then can take part free of charge.

Besides horseback riding, campers make arts and crafts and go on nature hikes, hayrides, tractor rides and treasure hunts. It's a full day of fun for families who need a getaway from the hardships of caring for children with cancer.

In some instances, when Camp Casey staffers hear of a child near one of their stops that is too sick to make it to camp, they will take the horses to the family.

"We have done that," Melamed said. "You wouldn't believe the looks we get. The families love it."

Powerful animals providing powerful therapy.

"We would love to bring Camp Casey here for the sick children in this area," Johnson said. "It is an experience the kids and their families would never forget."

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