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Healing reins

MSU students create a horse-riding camp to ease the minds of children with cancer

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For Tatum Wallace, a 7-year-old cancer patient, a day at Camp Casey helps to give her strength and courage to keep fighting against cancer.

At the Haslett horse camp, children can forget their disease for a day, said Amanda Thomas, camp volunteer and Wayne State University graduate student.

"They forget doctors and needles," Thomas said. "The big, grandiose horse gives them so much power and control - something they don't have with the disease."

Camp Casey is the brainchild of Molly Melamed, an MSU journalism senior and Ashley DeBoer, an education junior.

Melamed, who serves as executive director of the camp, and DeBoer, equine director, collaborated for four months to establish a day camp that would be a relaxing, stress-free environment.

The camp was founded in 2004 after the death of a 12-year-old riding student, Casey Foote, from bone and brain cancer.

Throughout Casey's treatments, she rode at the Shoeman Road Family Farm where Melamed and DeBoer worked.

She always had a smile, Melamed said. The MSU students saw that when Casey was riding, she was able to be a fun-loving child, not just someone battling cancer.

"We created the motto: 'The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a person,'" Melamed said.

Bonnie Strauss said she brought her granddaughter to camp because, "she'd suffered enough and now it was time to have some fun."

Rachel Barnhart, 11, a camper of Laingsburg, comes to support her 7-year-old brother Andrew who battled leukemia.

"I really like horses," she said. "(My brother and I) keep coming back so we can have some fun."

Even though Melamed is a full-time student and has a part-time job, she still puts in at least 20 hours of work a week for the camp, but she isn't paid.

"I didn't go into this thinking I'd fall in love with it," she said. "I thought it would be something that would look good on my résumé and make me feel good. I believe I receive more from camp than the children do. It's made me into a different person."

"Now, I know where I want to be in 10 years - working full-time for Camp Casey."

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