

## aspirations & achievements

by nicole adamson

photo by heather rousseau

### Define Superwoman:

"Someone who understands how to surround herself with other powerful people and learn from experiences, and not get discouraged."

— Molly Melamed

# Horse power

Camp founder brings respite  
to young cancer patients

Molly Melamed never planned to run a nonprofit. Until 2003, an alternative spring break program in Mexico (which she says she attended “chasing a guy”) was her volunteer claim to fame.

But a 10-year-old girl and a few of her 2,000-pound friends changed that. Melamed was a freshman at Michigan State University, working as a horseback-riding instructor at a nearby barn, when she met Casey Foote. Despite battling brain and bone cancer, Foote came religiously to ride.

“She reminded me a lot of myself at that age,” Melamed says, recalling Foote’s idealistic efforts to save baby birds stranded in the rafters, and overall passion for life. “It was obvious she was going through chemo, but she was just a normal kid. Riding horses was like her therapy.”

When Foote passed away in 2003, Melamed wanted to create something special in her memory. With help from barn owners, Sparrow Regional Children’s Center staff, and MSU students, she organized Camp Casey, a day of horseback riding, hayrides, crafts and other activities for children with cancer and their families.

The event was meant to be a one-time affair, Melamed says, but it was such a success that she made it into a full-fledged nonprofit. Today, the daylong camp travels to barns throughout Michigan, bringing with it Casey’s legacy.

Not surprisingly, Melamed attributes much of the camp’s magic to its spirited mascots. The animal interaction does more than take kids’ minds off their illness – it restores their confidence.

“Horses are these 2,000-pound cumbersome animals, and lots of kids are scared of them at first, but they’re overcoming that fear and gaining control of the animal,” Melamed says. “They can take that back and apply it to their fear of conquering cancer.”

Families benefit from Camp Casey, too. Parents take comfort in their child’s high spirits, while siblings, who may be thirsty for their share of attention, are treated just as special. “That really makes our program unique,” Melamed says. “You’re not just dropping your kid off for the day.”

Response to the camp has been so positive that Camp Casey has even started making therapeutic house calls with horses, for children too sick to travel.

## MOLLY MELAMED

*At 24, she’s the founder and executive director of Camp Casey, a horse camp for kids with cancer and their families.*

### Why is volunteering important?

“It’s important to take yourself out of your comfort zone and put yourself in situations that teach you about yourself. It really puts trite problems in perspective. And you realize your own value. One person can make a remarkable difference.”

### What are your superpowers?

“Mine would be confidence and discipline. If I don’t get what I want going down one avenue, I’ll go down another until I accomplish my goal.”

### How has volunteering changed your life?

“I feel I’ve always been a compassionate person, but it’s really given me a new perspective on the silly things that go wrong in my life. I don’t sweat the small stuff.”



▲ Hayley Skalba, Lexie Carie and Tyler Scheich interact with the horses at a past Camp Casey. Photo provided by Molly Melamed

“I’m catching up with the camp, rather than trying to bring the camp with me. I feel like it has its own spirit,” Melamed says. Her vision is to make Camp Casey a national organization, with programs linked to cancer centers across the country.

Melamed, who works a variety of part-time and temporary jobs to make ends meet, says her biggest challenges right now are time and money. Even in non-camp season, she puts in about 20 hours a week, unpaid, working on the camp, although she says it’s really a 50-hour-job.

“I also have to buy milk and pay rent, but I feel I’m letting kids down if I don’t do this,” she says. “I know it’s a risk I’m taking, but I’m willing to cut corners in my own life because I believe in this so much.”

To learn more, visit the Camp Casey Web site at [www.camp-casey.org](http://www.camp-casey.org).

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

### Donation wish list:

Sponsor for each camp day, sponsor for each therapeutic pony visit, laptop computer, photo printer, copy/fax machine, office supplies, video camera, T-shirts, bandanas, sunscreen, hand soap, hand sanitizer, bug spray, food, art and craft supplies, equestrian supplies (horse brushes, saddles/tack, saddle pads), entertainment (clowns, magicians, jugglers), paint, any monetary donation

### How Camp Casey can help you:

There’s still time to schedule a day camp session for ailing children and their families.

Contact Molly Melamed at 248.705.2780.

◀ The spirit of a young horseback rider inspired Molly Melamed to found Camp Casey. She is photographed at the Beekman Therapeutic Riding Center in Lansing, where some of her camps are held.