

# Women's LifeStyle

Metro Detroit

2010

April

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# Conquering Cancer One Neigh at a Time

By Lauren Maiman

**W**hile Molly Melamed always loved to horseback ride, it wasn't until she met Casey Foote in 2002 that horses became an integral part of her life... and livelihood.

Foote was undergoing treatment for bone and brain cancer and sought respite at weekly riding lessons at the same barn where Melamed worked to earn extra cash as a Michigan State student. Bonding over their shared love of animals, Melamed witnessed Foote finding refuge at the stables as well as her family's comfort in watching Foote enjoy herself during the time that was otherwise filled with doctors visits, hospital stays and chemotherapy.



When Foote died in November of 2003, Melamed vowed to do something in her honor. Melamed remembered her own childhood horse camp experience at Black River Farm and Ranch and decided to replicate a day camp for pediatric oncology patients at Sparrow Hospital, where Casey had been a patient. The horse-themed activity day would be called Camp Casey. "I put together slideshow presentations and showed them to various doctors at Sparrow. They advised me on several safety precautions we should take in order to make it 100 percent safe for kids with cancer. Ultimately it took months of planning just to get this one-day event to take place, but it felt so awesome to see the kids enjoying themselves for a day on the farm," Melamed remembered of Camp Casey's beginnings. "After our very first camp—remember, this was supposed to be a one-time deal—we got a note from a six-year-old boy named David. It simply said, 'thank you for the best day of my life.' After

that, I knew there was no way we could stop. We've been growing and doing more camps every summer ever since."

Since it welcomed its first group of kids in 2004, Camp Casey has progressed from a simple day camp ("I like to think of our early days as over-the-top birthday party-type events," Melamed has said) to the multifaceted format it follows today. As of 2008, Camp Casey began hosting cost-free overnight retreats to increase the therapeutic impact of the camps. So far, two Michigan facilities—Black River Farm and Ranch in Crosswell, Michigan, and Double JJ Ranch and Resort in Rothbury, Michigan—have served as ideal locales for the Cowboy Camp Outs. "While the day camps were a great way to launch our concept, the Cowboy Camp Outs are more of a mini-vacation for families that truly need a break," 27-year-old Melamed said. "The overnight aspect leaves a bigger, more lasting impression especially because the families have more time to bond within their family as well as with other families facing similar situations. We always emphasize our goal to include the entire family because we don't want the siblings to feel ignored or unimportant, as we sometimes hear they do in other situations. We want this journey to be about the whole family, not just the sick kid."

A banner year for the organization, 2008 also welcomed the addition of Camp Casey's Horsey House Calls, a program that brings Moe, Camp Casey's horse, to the homes of children too sick to attend camp. People are often surprised to discover that Moe can travel to any living situation—mobile home, apartment, subdivision, inner city—and that, while he's based in Novi, Michigan, he has gone as far as Marine City, in Michigan's thumb. "Horsey House Calls have enabled us to bring Camp Casey to children who otherwise would be unable to experience the healing powers of horses," Amy Gill, Camp Casey's Equine Director, said. "The stars really aligned for us to start this program. We were gifted Moe, who is the perfect horse for the job, from a local family. Around the same time, we received an astounding \$50,000 grant from an anonymous foundation, which enabled us to buy a truck and trailer to transport Moe to the kids' homes. We like to think that Casey played a part in this because we got news of the \$50,000 on what would have been her 17th birthday."

"I can't begin to tell you what it meant to us," Michelle Shaw, grandmother of CJ, a 2009 Horsey House Call recipient, said. "The kids are still talking about it and so are we. We feel very blessed and grateful to have had this experience."

Since both the Cowboy Camp Outs and Horsey House Calls have the warmer months jam-packed with action, the staff at Camp Casey wanted to create a program that would extend its reach into the cold, winter months. While Michigan winters may not be conducive to horseback riding, Camp Casey designed Outlaw Outings that are seasonal events, like professional sports games and trips to an ice skating rink, that provide fun diver-



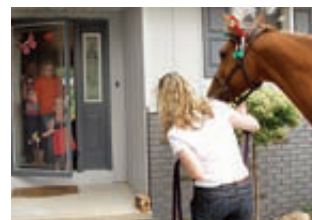
sions for families during Camp Casey's off-season. "Outlaw Outings are not our main focus, but we do like to keep in touch with families throughout the year when we may not be able to provide them a horse-related event," Melamed said. "We hope Outlaw Outings can achieve that as well as give our families something to look forward to that they don't have to worry about planning or paying for."

Both staff and supporters of Camp Casey have expressed an interest in expanding the organization regionally. "We have a few plans up our sleeves that would allow us to serve a greater area. Obviously, we are committed to perfecting Camp Casey as it stands now before we go out and franchise, but we are hopeful that we can do that in the future," Melamed said. "Ultimately, we want to give as many kids who are facing a cancer diagnosis as much fun as we can. That's what it's all about."

## COWBOY CAMP OUT

**June 2010** – Two-night Cowboy Camp Out at Black River Farm and Ranch in Crosswell, Michigan.

**August 2010** – One-night Cowboy Camp Out at Double JJ Ranch & Resort in Rothbury, Michigan. Families who wish to attend a Cowboy Camp Out may contact Molly Melamed at [molly@camp-casey.org](mailto:molly@camp-casey.org).



## HORSEY HOUSE CALLS

Horsey House Calls are ongoing throughout the year (weather permitting). If you know of a child with cancer who would like to meet Moe, please contact Amy Gill at [Amy@camp-casey.org](mailto:Amy@camp-casey.org). But, shhh! We like to keep our Horsey House Calls a secret, so kids are surprised when Moe arrives at their door.

## OUTLAW OUTINGS

Do you own an apple orchard, pumpkin patch, ice skating rink, movie theatre or any other family-friendly facility? Camp Casey is always looking for year-round Outlaw Outings that will keep our kids smiling. Please contact Lauren Maiman at [Lauren@camp-casey.org](mailto:Lauren@camp-casey.org) if you want to donate your services.