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News

Amazing Wings: ‘Helping kids conquer cancer, one neigh at a time’

by Rebecca Kelley

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Goodrich - For 5-year-old cancer patient Owen Giles, a day at Camp Casey provides a break from needles, hospitals and doctors—if only for a day.

Children who either have cancer or are recovering from it, had a chance to forget about their illness on June 29 at “Amazing Wings,” 9500 S. State Road, Goodrich.

Diagnosed with leukemia a year ago, Owen is usually sitting in a hospital undergoing chemotherapy treatments, but not this time. On this day, Owen groomed horses, played and giggled, but most of all, his mother Donna said, he loved riding the horses.

“When Owen sits on a horse, all is right with the world,” said Donna. “When he gets a chemotherapy treatment, that really knocks him out. He received a treatment the week before camp, so Owen was much more tired than usual. But when he got to Camp Casey and started riding the horses, he perked right up and had a great day.”

In its fifth year, Camp Casey’s motto is, “Helping kids conquer cancer, one neigh at a time.” The camp was designed, organized and launched by Executive Director Molly Melamed in 2004.

She got the idea to start the camp when she was teaching horseback riding while attending Michigan State University in her senior year as a journalism student. She saw the positive effect horses had on Casey Foote, a girl who died in 2003 of bone and brain cancer, just before her 13th birthday.

“The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a person,” Melamed said.

The camp is given at horseback riding facilities throughout Michigan. This year Camp Casey is providing four one-day retreats for kids with cancer and their families.

“I met Molly during her first year with Camp Casey,” said Jessica Moore, an NARH (North American Riding for the Handicapped) certified instructor and equine safety director for the camp. I started out as a volunteer. I really believe in this camp and have seen what it can do for children firsthand. When children are around horses for a day, it is a strength and power that these kids don’t normally feel.”

Moore said horses have an innate natural therapeutic source without knowing it. “For such a large animal, they have very gentle souls. The horses that we use definitely love their job as they interact with children.”

Judy Pearce, the owner of “Amazing Wings,” said she was pleased to be one of the four therapeutic riding stables selected to host Camp Casey in Michigan this year.

Pearce said Peter Toundas volunteered his Pine Crest Percheron draft horses to give wagon rides for everyone. “The horses took them around the property and through the woods. I remember the children in the wagon who had no hair, wearing bandanas riding around the property and through the woods.”

Impressed with the Camp Casey organization, Pearce said the adult and teen volunteers put up tents for activity stations such as a grooming, making tie-dye shirts and no-bake horse cookies.”

“These families are under such strain and often they don’t get together as a family because they are usually spiraling off into all sorts of directions for treatments. To see them in this environment, laughing and having fun, was a great treat for us,” said Pearce.