



# Golden Horseshoes & Silver Linings...

*A note from our Executive Director:*

When the pandemic hit, it was impossible to hide my panic and uncertainty regarding Camp Casey, the nonprofit I'd always been so confident running.

Our world seemed to be falling apart just as we were gearing up for a busy programming season. We had three important fundraisers scheduled - one only days away - and we didn't know how we would make good on the promises that we had spent the last six months making to our campers, healthcare partners, volunteers, seasonal staff, and donors.

Personally, I felt frozen as I added "homeschool teacher" to my already-stretched workload. I was all of a sudden sharing my workspace - or the kitchen table - with two small children who couldn't seem to go more than four minutes without interrupting to ask for help with first-grade math.

Thankfully, Camp Casey is supported by a team that knows how to "pony up", keep our nonprofit afloat, and come to my personal rescue.

During the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide shutdown, our team got busy on the tasks that we had needed to accomplish but never had enough time to tackle. Our website was updated, our long-awaited volunteer portal was implemented, our marketing materials were edited, our vendor premiums were price-shopped, and our program manuals were published.



Around this time, we saw no reason that our horse trailer should sit empty - even if not loading our Hero Herd horses. Our team organized our first-ever Round 'Em Up Supply Drive and encouraged supporters to fill our two horse trailers with essential goods, like hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes, that would be delivered to our camper families, who had been relying on such items long before this health crisis.

However, as the summer and the start of our programming season neared, we wondered what our summer would look like and what it would mean to our camper families.

Without a doubt, it was a phone call from Rhys VanDemark, a Child Life Specialist at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids, that convinced me that, not only is it possible for Camp Casey to offer its Horsey House Call program amid the pandemic, it is imperative that we do so.

Rhys explained that all of the summer's scheduled wish trips, summer camps, and other in-person services had been canceled and that Camp Casey's Horsey House Calls were his only hope to granting children - who might succumb to their illness before the end of the pandemic - a day of relief. Following our conversation, our team dusted off our cowboy boots, worked to amend our safety and sanitation standards, which were already high (after all, we have been visiting immunocompromised, homebound children for over a decade and a half), and hit the road.

We also realized that it would be impossible to send families on our Cowboy Camp Out program, which typically gathers our families in large groups. However, that didn't mean we couldn't provide respite in another way. With innovation, we created the Lone Star Getaway program, which would provide individual vacations to families by teaming up with privately-owned rental properties across the state of Michigan. The program, though designed out of desperation, was an undeniable success. Our Lone Star Getaways definitely fall in the "silver linings" column of 2020, and we're currently fundraising to make it a permanent part of our signature services.

We are proud to have visited 33 homes this summer and, thus, **provided Horsey House Calls to 33 families** in both Southeast and West Michigan. We also **sent 12 families on Lone Star Getaways**, and we **delivered supply packages to the homes of over 20 local cancer families**. Last, we also engaged campers and supporters virtually through a series of equine educational seminars, called Get Schooled! with the Parade Brigade, created by our volunteers.

Best of all, we opened our parameters to children with life-threatening illnesses beyond cancer, sickle cell disease, and aplastic anemia. Doing so was something we had always envisioned, but the pandemic offered clarity to its need.

Finally, being thrown into a remote work environment forced our team to critically think about how, when, and where we work. In doing so, we devised plans that will allow us to not only work more efficiently but increase our programs too.

While we are more than ready to say “Happy trails!” to 2020, we are proud to have not only stayed in the saddle during this wild ride but to have grabbed the bull by the horns, kicked cancer’s mane and tail, and any other horse-related pun you can think of.

I’ve never been more proud of our team, our mission, and our accomplishments, and I’ve also never more excited about what’s ahead.

To all of you who have supported us through these difficult times - all while going through your own challenges - thank you for your continued love and support.

Yeeshaw and here's to 2021!

*In health and horses,*

**Molly Reeser**

