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High in the saddle

Group grants wish to teen fighting cancer

By Alyssa LaRenzie

After her first season of showing horses, Margaret Hurt got some life-changing news.

Just 11 years old, she learned she had leukemia.

For months, her chemotherapy treatments left her too weak to ride. Still, she would show up at the stable to groom horses and watch her older sister show and ride them.

Hurt even rode the oldest horse up the stable's hill to the arena because it was too steep for her to climb.

Two years later, she's back in the saddle. And thanks to the Make a Wish Foundation, it's the saddle of her very own horse for the first time.

The 13-year-old from Milton received the horse Dec. 12 during a party at the barn where she rides, The Equestrian Reserve in south Forsyth.

It was a gift she had been dreaming about since her diagnosis, when the nurse said she would be able to make a wish.

"She was always plotting and planning what she would ask for," said her mother, Mary. "But she always wanted a horse most of all."

Some girls just love riding, but her daughter also loves horses, she explained.

Hurt first climbed atop a horse at age 2. Since then, she has grown close with every horse she's ridden.

When feeling well, the teen will ride four days a week, up to six hours a day.

Though Make A Wish was willing to grant the request last year, the family wasn't ready.

A year ago, Hurt was going through a difficult stretch. She had responded well to chemotherapy, but it left her feeling weak.

She is doing much better now, and her chemotherapy is scheduled to end in February.

Seeing her finally receive the horse brought on a wave of emotion to Equestrian Reserve owner Donna Romeu.

"All the memories came flooding back," Romeu said, "Of all of those days of seeing her in the hospital and of her being here

when she just wanted to hang out sitting next to me, even in cold, terrible weather, when she was just pale and thin as could be."

Romeu worked with Make a Wish to help secure Hoochie, the American Quarter horse the teen's been riding for the last 14 months.



As it turned out, the family who owned Hoochie planned to sell him. That's when Preston Byers got involved.

Byers and partners from his small business grants one wish each year through the Make a Wish Foundation.

Though he had donated in March, Byers decided to grant a second wish after hearing Hurt's story.

"It was just too good of a story to pass up," he said. "I think every kid grows up dreaming about having a horse. How often do you have a chance to make it come true?"

The local wish made it possible for Byers to meet Hurt, see her receive the horse and spend time with her.

Unlike a trip to Disney, the teen's wish let in all her friends, family and wish granters.

"This is a wish that she'll get to have forever," her mother said.