

All settled in, we went to explore. When we thought we'd seen it all, there was still even more!

We did skits one night, as the bats flew. I had lots of fun!

And rode horses –**yahoo!**

Front row (kneeling): Neysen Jomaa, Alex Grazier G'sell, Dunia Jomaa; Second row: Alison Emmert, Kaylee Adams, Yasmine Jomaa, Tayssir Jomaa, Kristyn Snyder, Andrew Samuels, Adlie Dabaja; Back row: Lacey Adams (on horse), Suzanne Munn, head wrangler Sarah Sortum, Guy Grazier G'sell, Maxwell Grazier G'sell, Christopher Heintz, Kyle Grazier G'sell, Brian Samuels, James Snyder, John Munn, Courtney Snyder (on horse)

Photo: Carla Jones



'AN OPPORTUNITY FOR NEW VICTORIES'

by Teresa Black

U-M pediatric oncology patients and their families find hope and determination...at a Colorado dude ranch

Photo: Fran Reynolds



Suzanne and John Munn

Photo: Fran Reynolds



Wrangler Sarah O'Connell, Charlotte DeHaan and Brian Samuels

During her visit to the Vista Verde Ranch in Colorado, nine-year-old Kristyn Snyder renamed her horse for the week and greeted him each day with an ebullient, “Spirit, I’m coming!”

Such a week of whimsy, recreation and relaxation brightened the lives of pediatric cancer patients from the U-M and their families last June. Through the generosity of John and Suzanne Munn, ranch owners and longtime supporters of the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center, a girl was granted her wish to ride a “white Cinderella horse,” a boy learned he could rock climb, and seven families bonded into a powerful support group.

Every year the Munns welcome children who are hematology and oncology patients in the U-M Health System to share in the beauty of Vista Verde, located just outside Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and bordering the stunning Mt. Zirkel wilderness area. The children and their families lodge in deluxe cabins, indulge in fine dining, and can participate in a full range of dude ranch activities including horseback riding, nature walks, mountain biking, fly fishing, rock climbing, hiking and rafting — often for the very first time.

Kristyn, who developed jubilant affection for “her” horse, had initially been reluctant to ride the animal at all. With patient encouragement from one of the wranglers on the Munn staff, she cautiously spent 20 minutes standing near the horse, then warily got on and sat immobile for another 20 minutes, but by the end of the session she was riding around the corral in delight. “There is something very therapeutic in taking on a new challenge and mastering it,” says Suzanne Munn, who has witnessed this transformation many times in her young guests. “It gives an opportunity for new victories.”

Andrew Samuels, 14, went rock climbing while at the ranch despite the fact that he had lost part of his left leg during prior cancer treatment. He shared with the other guests around the campfire one night how he learned that week from a wrangler to not focus on his disability, but rather on his abilities.

The Munns organize this special program in cooperation with pediatric physicians at the U-M Cancer Center and staff from the University’s C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital’s ➤

Photo: Carla Jones



Yasmine Jomaa and wrangler James Potter

We sang campfire songs, on the last day.

**I still miss the staff, John and Suzanne,
I think everyone else really misses the Fre**

Photo: Fran Reynolds



Front row: Jennifer Jillson and Sarah O'Connell
Back row: Robert Ortiz, Mark Fisher, Amber Eganhouse, Andy Williams

Child and Family Life program, which helps children and families cope with the stress experienced with chronic illness and treatment. The Western getaway gives patients new confidence and builds the spirit of hope and determination that helps them manage the challenges they face.

The family-oriented quality of the outing also benefits patients' brothers and sisters. "When one child in the family is fighting a disease, siblings might get less attention," says John Munn, who earned his M.B.A. at Michigan in 1958. The ranch's all-inclusiveness and attentive staff, including "kid wranglers" who prepare special activities for children, help keep everyone busy and accounted for.

The trip also provides respite for parents, who are often reluctant to travel with their families out of concern over an unexpected change in their child's medical condition. With a U-M doctor and nurse on hand for medical emergencies and Vista Verde staff trained in first aid and CPR, families are able to relax in a comfortable and inspiring environment.

Parents also have the opportunity to share experiences with other families. Although the adults may have seen each other before at the Cancer Center, the experience of being at the ranch brings them together to build lasting and important friendships.

Still, Suzanne Munn says about the program, "The real beneficiaries are our staff and us — we learn so much about the value of living from being with these families." Affected by a high incidence of cancer on both sides of their family, the Munns have long supported cancer research and started a fund for that purpose at the University in the late 1980s. After John sold his business, Wheel Horse Products, in South Bend, Indiana, and the family's children graduated from college, the Munns left their midwestern roots to purchase Vista Verde in 1991, but remained closely involved with the U-M and the development of the Cancer Center. Upon touring the Center prior to its opening with director Max Wicha, M.D., they were struck by the pleasant colors and brightness of the pediatric oncology unit. "It was a source of cheer and good feeling," John says. "And we wanted to add to that."

Their first guest family from the pediatric hematology and oncology unit arrived in 1996. The experience proved to be so positive that the Munns increased the number of families each year, until they decided in 1999 to open the entire ranch to them for one week each summer. Prior to that

Photo: Fran Reynolds



Kristyn Snyder and her horse, Spirit

When we left in the morning, we could still feel the hay!
and my horse, Winter, the most.
hch toast!

—Joshua Leyrer, age 10, 2-8-02

time, a local physician and nurse provided contingency medical support, but with a larger group, medical staff from the University, including pediatric oncologist Valerie Castle, M.D., began to accompany the families.

This year, with nearly 50 years of combined experience in pediatric oncology between them, Ray Hutchinson, M.D., and his wife Sally, a nurse practitioner, joined the group. “Our presence allows families to feel comfortable about being there,” says Sally. The Hutchinsons knew the cancer patients beforehand, brought summaries of their medical records and current treatment, and were readily available and in close communication with ranch staff and guests throughout the week.

The Vista Verde program has never experienced a major incident that threatened anyone’s health, but the availability of immediate medical attention is important. Injury in hematology and oncology patients can be less well tolerated than in healthy people, and there is greater risk of bone fractures if patients have been taking steroids. Though the ranch is only 45 minutes from the Yampa Valley Medical Center in Steamboat Springs, supplies such as oxygen, medications and repair kits for implanted catheters are made available for the ranch — as well as lots of sunscreen, since chemotherapy patients are highly sensitive to the sun.

In spite of the challenges they face each day, the hope of these children persists. On a prior trip, one frail child with a brain tumor faced difficulties completing a rock climb. After one attempt she had to return to the ground, paler, yet determined to reach her goal. With the help of a guide, she eventually made it, to the emotional and enthusiastic response of her fellow rock climbers. Says Sheila Morris, a Child Life Activities Therapist who helps coordinate the trip each year, “It represented a powerful moment in everything these kids face every day of their lives — that perseverance, that spirit to keep going.” 



Photo: Theresa Foster

Andrew Samuels, center, with brother Brian and parents, Kiela and Brian



Photo: Theresa Foster

Alison Emmert and her brother, Craig. Alison passed away three months after the Vista Verde trip, on October 20, 2002.