

Local organizations team up for kids

This summer, while Camp Eagle Cap (CEC) volunteers were making preparations to lead a group of local children on a grand adventure, the Heartwarmers were making blankets to help ensure the kids' camp experience was warm and fuzzy.

Their shared efforts gave 10 kids the trip of a lifetime.

After taking horsemanship classes provided by Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch, the kids rode on horseback for five hours way up high into the heady country of the Wallowa Mountains, where they enjoyed six days of camp followed by two days of activities at Wallowa Lake. They fished, hiked, treasure-hunted, sang, painted with watercolors, drove go-carts and played on the lake.

Around a bonfire at the end of Day One, leaders presented each camper with their own blanket, hand-made by the Sisters branch of Heartwarmers. The Heartwarmers is a nonprofit organization whose volunteers make and donate fleece blankets for at-risk children and adult cancer patients.

CEC is a nonprofit youth camp begun last year by Sisters resident Chester Freeman to benefit vulnerable children. Freeman networks

with local agencies to identify eligible students, usually 10 to 12 years old, for a no-cost week of camp. Campers typically have had unstable childhoods for whatever reason, or have experienced trauma. CEC board member Garth Tosello said, "They are coming from some challenging family situations and need hope in their lives."

At camp, leaders communicate positive values and non-judgmental love. With each day, this year's campers became braver and more confident. They voiced their excitement about conquering fears and making new friends. Leaders and mentors remarked that the experience was transformational for them as well.

Twenty volunteers from Sisters Country accompanied the children, including Freeman and his wife, Kalia; Jill and Benny Benhower; LuAnn Bishop; Winfield Durham; Kit and Garth Tosello; and Cheri and Don Wilson. Damon Frutos acted as camp medic. Youth mentors included Sisters High School students Lydia Newman and Chelsea Tosello, as well as recent graduate Ross Grant.

Because of his own unstable childhood, Freeman has long dreamed of launching

this type of camp. He recalls how, at the age of 7, he was left alone at home for 10 days with nothing to eat but crackers and mustard.

"When I was 15," said Freeman, "I was blessed with the opportunity to be a camp counselor for sixth-graders. I spent time showing them the simple things of life, the true things. The simplest things are those God created for us. I was able to help quiet children open up and become friends with others in their class. This has stayed with me throughout my life and has always made me want to do more."

Last summer, Freeman's dream came to life. He and Kalia assembled a board of directors, raised funds, recruited volunteers and developed curriculum; the first-ever Camp Eagle Cap took wing.

The foster parent of one of this year's campers said their child's adventure was "more than he could have ever experienced at a traditional camp. And, in fact, he would not have been able to even go to one of those."

Another child's grandparent said, "It was the best thing that ever happened to her. She cries happy tears every time we talk about camp."

Several of the campers



PHOTO BY KIT TOSELLO

Blankets from Heartwarmers enhanced the camp experience.

expressed hope that when they are old enough, they can return as youth mentors. Freeman says that when that happens, another part of his dream will be realized. He encouraged the kids to live responsibly, so they may be invited back as counselors in a few short years.

With two successful camps in the rearview mirror, Freeman is now "thinking

ahead and dreaming of helping more kids and following up with the ones we have shared God's love with." He's raising funds in the hope that CEC can offer two camps next summer, so that twice as many kids will enjoy a life-changing adventure. For more information, to donate, or to nominate a child for camp, visit www.campeaglecap.com.

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