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Top News Stories

Young patients get times of their lives

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Photo by Tom O'Dare

David Vaught, founder of Andy's Special Friends shows photos of special trip recipients in 2009. After witnessing his son's struggle with cancer Vaught founded the organization to enable children undergoing treatment for cancer to take vacations to the Grand Strand.

By Tom O'Dare

David Vaught was raised in Loris and now resides near Longs. He said he had no idea how much stress and

anxiety parents felt when their children were diagnosed with cancer.

That is until his son Andy was diagnosed with the dreaded disease in 1996.

Andy had cerebral palsy and had undergone several operations up to that time. It was while a junior in high school that doctors found that he had osteogenic sarcoma, a cancer in his leg.

Doctors referred the Vaughts to Chapel Hill, North Carolina for the cancer treatment. Three times a month, they made the trip there and back. After six months, the surgeons removed a tumor and replaced Andy's knee.

During the time of treatment, Andy received a special trip from the Make A Wish Foundation. A big country music fan, Andy and his family got a trip to Fan Fair in Nashville, Tennessee. Here, he was able to meet a number of his favorite country music stars.

Unlike many young patients, the treatments and the surgery had a favorable outcome for Andy's cancer—leaving him cancer free.

His dad said the worry about his son's health and the uncertainty of the outcome took its toll on the entire family.

"You don't realize what families go through during this process," Vaught said. "Your first reaction is to ask God to let it be you, not your child. Then you just have to put it in God's hands and pray for the best."

After it was clear that Andy was going to be okay, Vaught, who is retired now, said he started thinking about everything that the parents of cancer-ridden children go through—the hurt in seeing their child sick, the unknown of what will happen.

"The pressure and anxiety for the parents and family when the child is undergoing treatment can be overwhelming," he said.

After many hours of praying and soul-searching, Vaught put together a committee to come up with a way to help families get through the process. With the help of his church, he started Andy's Special Friends.

The group gets referrals from various hospitals throughout North and South Carolina of young people ages 5-18 who are undergoing cancer treatment. Some of the young people have terminal prognoses, some do not.

At no cost, the young patient and their immediate families are brought to the Grand Strand for a long weekend of fun and food. They are put up at the Kingston Plantation for the

weekend—a weekend packed with fun and excitement for the entire family.

“We get them tickets to all the shows—the Carolina Opry, the Alabama Theatre, Dixie Stampede, Alligator Adventure and Ripley’s Aquarium,” Vaught said. “These places are wonderful to our folks. The kids get to meet the casts afterwards for special photos and gifts.”

In addition, area restaurants have been gracious in offering free meals throughout their stay. At several stops, the foundation gives the young patients copies of the Bible or Bible stories. If that’s not enough to make for a fun weekend, each child also gets other special surprises.

Vaught says the involvement of the community, especially the shows, attractions and the restaurants have been incredible.

“Just seeing their faces light up when they get the gifts or meet the folks in the show makes it worthwhile,” he said. “Some of the kids are pretty sick when they get here and some you can’t tell that they’re going through the tough times they are. It’s a joy to see them have a good time and create memories for them and their families that they might not have had.”

The first family back in 1997 was a young girl from Chapel Hill that Andy had befriended while undergoing his treatments.

With tears in his eyes, he points to pictures of some of their visitors from recent years who have made the trek here. Some of the kids are doing fine today, some didn’t beat the cancer.

The foundation usually funds trips twice a month from March through December. Already, Vaught said they’re getting requests from hospitals for this year’s children.

A venture like this obviously takes a lot of money to exist. Most of the revenue for Andy’s Special Friends comes from a golf tournament held in Roseboro, North Carolina each year. Vaught said he was speaking to a Baptist men’s group one night in Whiteville, North Carolina when a gentleman came up to him afterwards and said he really liked the idea of what Vaught was doing.

“The man was a gentleman named Doug Creeger and he owns a golf course in Roseboro,” Vaught said. “He said he wanted to put on a golf tournament to raise money for us. This has become so successful over the years that now he has to turn people away.”

Vaught said the tournament has been a major help but of course would gladly accept other donations and assistance.

“We were blessed by God that Andy survived cancer and is doing well today,” Vaught said.

“If we can do anything to help ease the burdens of these families then all of this is well worth it.”

Anyone wishing to help Andy’s Special Friends in any way can call 910-653-3745.

Questions or Comments? letters@nmbtimes.com

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