

Firm President Makes Dreams Come True

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

J. PRESTON BYERS
CPA, CFP

President, ClearBridge
Wealth Management
Inc.

Age: 42

Family: Natalie, wife;
Taylor, 9; Trey, 8;
Lawson, 4

College: Bachelor
of Arts in Business,
Furman University;
MBA, University of
Georgia

Last Job: Wealth
manager,
Ernst & Young LLP,
Nashville, Tenn.



A Dream Fulfilled: Cancer survivor Margaret Hurt and her horse, courtesy of the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Preston Byers

By J. Scott Trubey

In a season in which banks and financial companies have been cast as Grinches, the head of one Sandy Springs-based money management firm played Santa.

J. Preston Byers, President of ClearBridge Wealth Management, and his team helped fulfill the dream of owning a horse for an Alpharetta teen stricken with cancer.

"Every little girl asks for a horse for Christmas. How many actually get one?" Byers said Dec. 12 as 13 y.o. Margaret Hurt led her horse around the paddock at an equestrian preserve off Old Alpharetta Road.

Margaret, with a stature and demeanor much more mature than her age, has been fighting acute lymphatic leukemia for two years. In her darkest days, she was too ill to get out of a wheelchair, much less guide a quarter horse through its paces.

The Make-A-Wish Foundation approached Margaret more than a year ago to learn of her wish. Margaret had competed in Western-style riding competitions for years, and asked for a horse. But at the time she was too ill.

Make - A - Wish approached Byers and his firm in late October for assistance once Margaret's health had improved. ClearBridge had fulfilled its one wish for the year, but Byers said the firm decided it could do a second.

ClearBridge, an independent wealth advisory founded three years ago with \$120 million in assets under management, has a foundation with four designated charities: Make-A-Wish, Camp Sunshine, The Wounded Warrior Project and The Chestatee Wildlife Preserve.

"We work very hard, and we've been very successful as a firm," Byers said as he watched Margaret ride in the performance ring. "We feel we're in a position where we should give back. It's very important in our culture and in our company."

Byers, who has previously served on the board of Camp Twin Lakes and is on the board of Camp Sunshine, said he has a special place in his heart for children with cancer and special needs.

"My kids are so healthy, but I could get a call tomorrow," said Byers, a father of three. "It puts everything into perspective. I never get down or mad about a bad day or worry about what's in the news... not after seeing what these kids go through."

Continues from page 26 A: Firm President Makes Dreams Come True

Margaret was diagnosed in the fall of 2007. "There were days and weeks at a time when if she could make it to the sofa it was a good day," said her mother, Mary Hurt.

About 18 months ago, her health improved to the point where her doctors said she could come to the stables, but needed to stay away from hay — a challenge in a horse stable; but Margaret started to turn around. She would come to the barn in a wheelchair just to be near horses.

"She was so sick during that time that she shut out her friends," her mother said. "She'd come to the barn because the horse didn't care if she was sick or if she couldn't ride or if she was bald."

When her health returned to the point she could ride again, Margaret was paired with "Hoochie", a 5-year-old quarter horse. Margaret said her impression of the horse was that she was "a little mean at first," but the two quickly bonded.

She leased the horse for about 18 months, winning a title in her age group at Wills Park. Hoochie was the perfect candidate for Margaret. It's a horse she knew, and Hoochie belonged to an absentee owner. But there was a hitch, which turned out to be a blessing. Hoochie was owned by a woman from Alabama who was moving to the United Kingdom and was looking to sell her. The deadline was Oct. 31, and Make-A-Wish needed to move fast.

"When it came time to make her wish, there was no way she could let Hoochie go," Hurt said. Margaret was the third child granted a wish with the assistance of ClearBridge. The two other children — also young girls — wanted to take trips to Disney World and Hollywood, Calif. A horse was another matter — both for ClearBridge and for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. First, it's a live animal and one with which the girl must have a connection. And second, the family must have the capacity to board the horse and care for her.

ClearBridge helped acquire the horse and the foundation was satisfied the family could care for Hoochie.



Margaret, who has spent most of her life riding, is grateful for the donation that made "Hoochie" a permanent part of her life

"It puts everything in perspective. I never get down or mad about a bad day or worry about the negative news of the day... not after seeing what these kids go through."

Preston Byers
ClearBridge Wealth Management, Inc.

On Dec. 12, Make-A-Wish arranged for a limousine to pick up Margaret at her home. When it arrived at the Equestrian Preserve, Hoochie was waiting, wearing an orange ribbon; Margaret's show color.

"I'm so grateful for everything that they've done," Margaret said. For the most part, riding is Margaret's life. "I spend half my time here. It's my favorite place to be," she said.