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Family grants girl's wish for a horse

By Melody Spurney

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Wanting a horse is almost a prerequisite for girls growing up, though associated costs and care can be deterrents for many families.

One Atlanta girl had care and riding down to an art. Spending hours at The Equestrian Reserve in Alpharetta, all 13-year-old Margaret was missing was a horse of her own. On Saturday, the teen's special wish came true thanks to the Make-a-Wish Foundation and the generosity of a part-time Highlands family. (It is Make-a-Wish's policy not to release the last names of wish recipients.)

Margaret suffers from Acute Lymphatic Leukemia, commonly known as ALL. This blood cancer represents about 23 percent of cancer diagnoses among children age 15 and younger.

Preston Byers, president of ClearBridge Wealth Management in Atlanta, stepped in to help grant the girl's wish. Byers is the son of Lee and Kitty Byers of Highlands, and his family has owned a cabin on Lake Sequoyah since 1949.

"We knew we had a very unique opportunity to make this a very special holiday for a very deserving young girl," said Jill Thornton of Make-a-Wish. "But we needed funding to make it a reality. ClearBridge answered the call to help without any hesitation."

Byers said Margaret has ex-



Submitted photos

Above left: Margaret, 13, is pictured with her new horse at The Equestrian Reserve in Alpharetta, Ga., on Dec. 12. Above right: Margaret and Preston Byers are pictured with Hoochee.

tensive experience with horses. In addition to riding and competing at the stables, she has also participated in the animals' care, even when she was too sick to ride herself.

"A year ago she was too weak to ride, but she would go to the stables and watch others ride and groom the horses," said Byers. "Now, she's very tall and very beautiful and very healthy, at least for now."

Byers said that Margaret's parents had five horses from which to choose, and they settled on a thoroughbred Quarter Horse named Hoochee. Byers said Hoochee, short for Chattahoochee, was "fiery." However, he said it was obvious the two already had a special bond. He said Margaret told her parents that was the horse she would

have chosen.

"She has won competitions on this horse," Byers said. "You could just tell there was a real special connection between the two of them."

The wish ceremony was held Saturday afternoon at the stables, but Byers said he had the opportunity to meet with Margaret and her family on Friday. Although he said the teen was not told specifically about her new horse, she had a pretty good idea when she arrived at the stables on Saturday in a limo to find a crowd waiting that included friends, family, church members, classmates and stable staff. In addition to Hoochee, she also received other horse-related gifts and a horse themed cake.

"She kind of knew by then what was going on," Byers

said.

Byers said Margaret was a shy girl who seemed even embarrassed by all of the attention she received.

"She told me when I talked to her later that she was looking forward to Sunday when she could get out and ride the horse around and it would just be her," Byers said.

As part of her wish, the foundation prepared a "contract" for Margaret to sign promising that she would always love and care for the horse and that she would never stop dreaming and wishing.

Byers said the experience was rewarding for his family as well.

"It was just an unbelievable day," he said.