

Harford children experience summer enrichment at Camp Happy



Grace Callwood, 10, talks about Camp Happy, a four-week summer camp she founded at Anna's House. (David Anderson and Dan Griffin, Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By **David Anderson**
The Aegis

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10-year-old Grace Callwood recovers from cancer treatment, starts summer enrichment program for homeless child

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Grace Callwood has been helping other children since she was a toddler, when she requested that her 3rd birthday presents be given to children at University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Medical Center in Bel Air.

Now, at age 10, she has seen the completion of the first year of Camp Happy, a four-week summer camp for children of homeless families.

Grace, who lives in Abingdon, is the founder and board chair for We Canceve, a nonprofit organization created to help children with cancer and their families. Grace was diagnosed with lymphoma.

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ended 16 months ago, according to her doctor, Dr. Sinai Hospital in Baltimore.

Grace is going into fifth grade at William S. James Elementary School in Abingdon. She was 7 years old and was starting first grade when she was diagnosed.

Unguru, who visited the camp recently to read to the campers during the start of its fourth and final week, said he still sees Grace for regular follow-up appointments, and she mentioned Camp Happy during a recent clinic.

"I told her if it worked out with my schedule, I'd love to come and read," he said.

Unguru said the campers "were a nice group; they warmed up pretty quickly."

"I enjoy being with kids," he added. "It keeps you young."

We Canceve supports children who are homeless, in foster care or being treated for illness through programs such as Camp Happy, and TransFUNers Kits, packages of craft items for children receiving blood transfusions so they can create decorative covers for the transfusion equipment.

The Threads of Hope program, through which donated back-to-school outfits are provided to homeless children, is also available.

More information can be found online at www.wecanceve.org.

This year is the first for Camp Happy, which is available through Anna's House, a program of Catholic Charities of Baltimore.

Anna's House, based in Bel Air, "provides transitional and permanent housing for homeless women and children in Harford County, and helps them on the road to self-sufficiency," according to a description posted on its website, www.catholiccharities-md.org/annas-house.

"Our goal really is that, the time they spend here they get back on their feet, but that is the last time that they are homeless," Cynthia Wood, program director for Anna's House, said. "We want to see them in a position where they are stable and have a much brighter future for themselves and their children."

Grace, who sat down for an interview with *The Aegis* earlier this month during the last week of Camp Happy, said the camp came out of discussions with Amanda Morlok, a case worker with Anna's House and the director for Camp Happy.

Grace said she and her mother, T'Jae Ellis, planned to donate books to Anna's House, "but we saw they already had plenty of books."

They discussed with Morlok another way to help children being served by Anna's House.

"She [Morlok] was just dreaming out loud, saying that she hoped they could have a summer enrichment program, and I created Camp Happy," Grace said.

Grace created and developed the camp with support from her mother and grandmother, NeAnni Ife, of Abingdon.

"It's her vision," Ellis said. "I help execute because I'm the one that needs to email the adults."

Ellis said Ife worked with Anna's House staff each day to help run the camp.

Local teenagers also helped out as volunteer counselors.

Ellis and Grace's grandmother have helped support camp programs and worked with the children.

"Our kids would never have those opportunities without what they've organized for us," Wood said of Grace and her family.

Each week had a theme

The camp, which was free to families, was open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Thursday.

An average of 15 children between the ages of 4 and 19 attended each week, Ellis said.

Each week of the camp had a different theme.

The first week covered "young explorers."

"We did plants, trees and flowers, things that crawl, and science," Grace said.

Ellis, a civilian employee at Aberdeen Proving Ground, encouraged four APG scientists to come and interact with the children during the first week.

The second week was about superheroes, and the children talked about their favorite superhero and played "superhero bingo," Grace said.

A soldier from APG visited the camp during superheroes week, which ended around Independence Day.

Grace said her grandmother gave the campers superhero-related homework to boost their self-confidence.

"We had to look in the mirror before we go to bed and say, 'I am awesome' and 'Yeah, I can,' so we would have more confidence," Grace said.

Photography was the theme of the third week, and Grace's grandmother, an amateur photographer, helped the campers take photos.

Grace said the children learned about photo angles, backgrounds and lighting.

"We actually went on a nature hike just outside Anna's House to take pictures," Grace said.

The children spent the fourth week preparing homemade games for a camp carnival scheduled for the last day, July 16.

When Unguru, Grace's doctor, visited on July 13, the campers were putting together their carnival games.

"Enjoy the rest of camp," he told them after he finished reading and chatting with the children. "Have fun at the carnival."

He described Grace as "remarkable."

"From day one, when I met her, it was clear to me there was a lot there," he said.

Unguru said Grace "has truly been remarkable in her ability to coordinate, organize and then follow through."

"Her name is so fitting, because during the entire [cancer] treatment ordeal, she handled it with grace," he said.

Campers, parents react

Cheyenne Walter, 14, of Bel Air, who is going into the ninth grade at Bel Air High School, said she has enjoyed Camp Happy.

"So far it's actually pretty good," she said. "It gets me outdoors; it gets me out of the house. I enjoy making new friends and meeting new people."

Cheyenne said she has not attended a summer camp before.

She said her mother has received transitional housing support from Anna's House. She described how the camp experience has improved their relationship.

She said she has learned "to help my mom with her job, try to help her set goals with herself and make better money choices."

Becky Allen, 34, of Bel Air, said her 4-year-old son, Aden, "is thoroughly enjoying himself" at Camp Happy.

"He's liked everything," she said. "He's very excited to come every day."

Allen, who works as a residential counselor with adults who have developmental disabilities, called Anna's House "a saving grace," and she has developed a support system with other women who have received services

there.

"It's helped keep my family together," she said.

Grace said she could tell the campers enjoyed their experience, "and that they get very excited."

"I am very happy, and I was very excited when Camp Happy got approved, because I really wanted the children here to be able to have something to do this summer, and I was really hoping that they would enjoy it, and I'm glad that they all came," she said.

Plans for next summer

Ellis said the carnival held during the last day of camp "was an absolute success."

Carnival-goers could play each child's game and win a prize, and they also took part in relay races and line dancing. They received treats from area businesses such as Flavor Cupcakery and Tikiz of Harford County.

Ellis said discussions are scheduled for early August to expand Camp Happy to Harford Family House, of Aberdeen, for next summer.

Harford Family House is another of the transitional housing programs serving the homeless in Harford County.

"[Grace] hopes to have Camp Happy offered at all three shelters by 2017, and right now we seem to be on track to do that," Ellis said.

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