

Wishes do come true: 5-year-old sees her dream horse in real life



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July 23, 2008 7:08 AM

Mycah Nichols is like a lot of 5-year-old girls -- she loves horses with a passion, even going as far to answer in "neighs" when her parents ask her a question.

Her room is decorated with horse paraphernalia, and she has sat through hundreds of viewings of her favorite movie, "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," an animated DreamWorks production showcasing a stunning wild mustang as it journeys through the frontier.

On Tuesday, Mycah's biggest dream came true.

Through the auspices of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the young girl journeyed from Midlothian, Texas, with her parents and grandmother to meet the real-life Spirit. The horse, who served as the model for the animated feature, lives at the Return to Freedom wild horse sanctuary on Jalama Road, just south of Lompoc.

Mycah has spent much of the past eight months battling Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, a cancer of the white blood cells, and undergoing chemotherapy. She is now in remission and is on maintenance chemotherapy, said her mother, Angie.

When she plays, Mycah often recreates the story of "Spirit," which was released in 2002. She makes her parents play the part of not-so-gentle humans depicted in the film, and she takes on the role of the triumphant horse -- neighing and prancing like the wild mustang she adores.

"Well, I like the movie when he (Spirit) escapes from the mean mans," Mycah explained on Tuesday, as she watched the horse graze. "And he's awesome too. I love Spirit and I be the horse."

Return to Freedom was founded 10 years ago by Neda DeMayo. In the six years Spirit has lived with her, many adults and children have visited to see the famous steed. But this is the first time Return to Freedom has been the focus of a Make-A-Wish request, Ms. DeMayo said.

"For years, I've been wanting someone to come here for a wish," she said. "Most children pick Disneyland. I was so amazed at this child."

Though initially Mycah considered Disney World as her wish choice, the final idea was soon declared.

Mycah Nichols, 5, who is suffering from leukemia, got her wish to see the real horse on which the animated feature "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron" was based, thanks to the Make-A-Wish Foundation. The horse lives at the Return to Freedom wild horse sanctuary on Jalama Road, just south of Lompoc. NORA WALLACE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

"She said, 'Mommy, I want to see the real Spirit,'" Mrs. Nichols recalled. "I said to her, 'That's like saying you want to see 'Shrek.' It's just a cartoon."

Not knowing that the animated Spirit was modeled on a real horse, Mrs. Nichols got on the Internet and tried to find a wild horse vacation as a substitute. Then she found the Return to Freedom web site.

"It was like divine intervention," said Mrs. Nichols, as her husband Chris stood by in support. "I started to cry."

On Tuesday, Mycah was able to feed Spirit hay, and pet the mustang. The entire group had a picnic lunch in the pasture where Spirit grazes. Mycah also was able to visit a three-week-old Hart Mountain mustang Ms. DeMayo named after her.

"This little girl had a dream and she got it granted," Ms. DeMayo said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. How many people get their wishes? It's pretty awesome."

During the afternoon, Mycah presented Spirit with a new pink brush, some carrot and grain biscuits and a small wooden horse she'd decorated on the plane ride to California. In return, she received a gift basket full of Spirit-related items -- many from the personal collection of the film's director, Lorna Cook. She received a plastic Spirit horse set, a pink Spirit lunchbox, a Spirit drawing from Ms. Cook, several movie posters and a ceramic Spirit memento box.

When she grows up, Mycah said she wants to be a veterinarian.

"I'm going to work here," she declared.

During their five-day visit, the Nichols, along with grandmother Barbara Adams and Make-A-Wish volunteer Debra Schweiss, are staying at Circle Bar B ranch, where the youngster will have more time with horses.

They're also going to the beach and possibly the zoo.

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Neda DeMayo, owner of the Return to Freedom wild horse sanctuary near Lompoc, looks on as Mycah Nichols visits with Spirit, a wild horse that was the basis for the animated feature "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron." The Make-A-Wish Foundation arranged the visit for Mycah, whose leukemia is in remission