

COMMENTARY



LAURINDA JOENKS

Round and round and round

Rounders don't stop before or after the Springdale rodeo

While most folks watched the Super Bowl with friends Sunday, nearly 20 girls gave up chicken wings and cheese dip in support of their team: the Rodeo of the Ozarks Rounders. As they do every Sunday evening, the Rounders practiced for their performance at the Springdale rodeo July 1-4. The indoor arena of Isuba Valley Horse Park near Siloam Springs and the body heat from the horses provided warmth for the girls before the temperature plummeted into the 20s and snow fell outside.

"This makes the difference between being good in Springdale and being great in Springdale," said Kelly Morris, the Rounders director.

"The Rounders are a high-speed precision drill team," said Kent Morris, Kelly's husband and co-director. What Kent didn't say is that these girls go through their paces from the back of a horse. "There's no need to say 'horseback' because the venues we're in, it's assumed."

"They are volunteers and ambassadors for the rodeo," Kelly said of her team. The girls are involved in some way with every rodeo event.

But the Rounders are more than just the Rodeo of the Ozarks, Kent insisted. They perform at rodeos around the region: Lincoln, Siloam Springs, Sallisaw, Okla., Cassville, Mo., and more. They also attend community events on behalf of the rodeo, such as the Autism Involves Me walk last spring in Bentonville. The final event of their year is the Christmas Parade of the Ozarks in late November.

"When we make an appearance, we always wear our hats and shirts and look the part," Kelly said. "Kids are drawn to the girls."

To be a Rounder, a girl must be at least 14 years old and pass a tryout. But the Rounders are inclusive, Kent said, noting that Letausha Ahrents of Gentry doesn't want to ride, but she instead takes pictures and promotes the team and the rodeo on social media. Some of the younger team members will not ride during the routine, but they will run the team's flags into the arena before the dance. "Flag carriers are just as much a part of the routine," Kelly said.

The girls' backgrounds vary. Some are in high school, some in college, some home schooled, some working in jobs such as riding teacher, dental assistant, office assistant and veterinary assistant. Their horses are just as varied, but they must be "trained and finished," Kelly said. "We've got a calf roping horse, a team roping horse, a trail riding horse, some reining horses, barrel racing horses, some cutting horses, a horse they use to teach riding lessons ...," she said.

"These girls are eat up with horses," Kent Morris said. "These girls do this because they love it."

The work for the Rounders wasn't over when practice finished. The girls still had to unsaddle the horses, cool down the horses to dry the sweat, brush the horses, load them in their trailers, put their blankets on, drive home, feed the horses and turn them out to pasture — and Lacey Mounce of Springdale noted she had no heater in her truck. A similar to-do list was completed before practice, too.

Rachel Lee of Grove, Okla., said she would get to bed about 10:30 p.m. "But it's well worth it," she said.

Miranda Sims of Fort Smith estimated her bedtime to be 2 a.m. She had to return her horse to her farm in Lavaca before heading home.

Sunday night, Kelly Morris and her partner Lori Perdue led the girls and horses through some

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Surgery changes lives for Rogers teen, Springdale father

ALLISON CARTER
NWA DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Hunter Phifer checks in to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Medical Center at 4:50 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 21. He says he's not nervous, but a slight twitch of his eye suggests otherwise. He hasn't slept and says he's hungry.

Brian Smothers arrives at the Little Rock hospital just before 6 a.m. He's nervous but in good spirits. He's late, having overslept, and is rushed through check-in. He's all smiles, and he waves as the pre-op doors close behind him.

Phifer's mother receives a text message a few minutes later that eases her tension. "I'm pretty sure running late is genetic with me," Smothers writes. "Hunter may very well run five minutes behind from today forward."

At 7:57 a.m., the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences kidney transplant team begins surgery to remove Smothers' left kidney, a three-hour procedure that would ultimately run long.

At 9 a.m., Phifer's surgery begins. A second team of surgeons has waited just long enough to ensure the kidney can be placed as soon as it's ready to be moved. That surgery is expected to run nearly six hours.

If something goes wrong during either surgery, the likelihood of Phifer getting another shot is low.

An estimated 26 million adults in the United States currently suffer from kidney disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There are approximately 400,000 patients on dialysis. More than 100,000 patients are on the kidney transplant waiting list. Today, nearly 900,000 people are being treated for end stage renal failure.

Phifer is no longer any of these.

At 3:30 p.m., Phifer's surgery is declared a success as he passes clean, filtered urine for the first time in his life. In her excitement, his mother, Amber Atwood, takes a photo of the waste and posts it on Facebook.

Smothers and Phifer have been preparing for kidney transplant surgery since Aug. 28, a day when Smothers and partner Stephanie Olson found out Smothers was a blood match for Phifer, making him a candidate to donate a kidney to the ailing teen.

It was Phifer's 19th birthday.

HISTORY

Atwood and Greg Phifer knew their son was ill before he was born, but nothing could have prepared them for how sick he would turn out to be, Phifer said.

Hunter Phifer was born in 1995 at Northwest Medical Center-Springdale shortly after Atwood's seven-month ultrasound indicated that the first-time mom had no amniotic fluid surrounding the child and that he was "very sick," she said.

"He's been sick from day one," said Phifer's grandfather, Bill Andrews. "It was sad to see him so sick and small and to still see him so bad now."

Ten hours after birth, the infant was airlifted to Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock where a team of doctors and nurses determined the severity of what they now know was near-complete renal failure, Atwood said.

He was put on dialysis immediately.

Phifer wasn't the first in his family to suffer from kidney disease. Paternal grandmother Norma Swanson battled kidney failure and received a new kidney 11 years ago. Atwood's uncle is still on dialysis after a kidney transplant failed. He is not a candidate for another surgery.

At the time of his birth, doctors told his parents to expect Phifer to remain on the treatments through childhood and that he



NWA Democrat-Gazette/Allison Carter

Hunter Phifer waits patiently before a kidney transplant surgery that will hopefully change his life. The 19-year-old has suffered from kidney disease since birth and but hopes his health will improve with donation of an organ from Springdale father Brian Smothers on Jan. 21.

"I remember losing the feeling in my legs. I remember right then and there, looking at Brian in a whole new way. Before he was this young daddy who I kept a kid for. Now he was this man who was a hero, an angel — our saving grace.

Amber Atwood
mother of kidney recipient

would be in need of a kidney transplant by age 8, Atwood said.

Phifer defied the odds. He was taken off dialysis ten days after birth, and although he suffered from a heart condition and ADHD,

the child grew into a teen with enough kidney function to avoid further treatment.

But it was not to last.

On May 9, 2014, Phifer was attached to a dialysis machine for the second time in his life. He would undergo the procedure nightly until the morning of Jan. 21, when the dimple-faced teen disconnected from the device for the final time before leaving for the hospital.

COMPLICATIONS

Smothers and Olson moved with 2-year-old daughter Emory to Springdale almost a year ago. They had no idea how that decision would ultimately change their lives and that of a boy they barely knew.

Smothers met Atwood in the summer of 2014 after enrolling his daughter in Amber's Lil Angels, a daycare program Atwood runs in her home.

After hearing about Phifer's struggles and "doing some soul searching," Smothers decided find out if he could donate to the teen, he said.

In late August, tests confirmed the 25-year-old was a match. Almost two months of

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BENEFITS WITH FRIENDS

Gala combines camo, couture

Havenwood supporters will don Camo and Couture for the nonprofit organization's annual Angel Gala benefit Feb. 14 at the Bentonville DoubleTree Suites.

Attire for the event is semi-formal. Guests are encouraged to wear camouflage or couture clothing, but it is not required, according to Rachel Cox, Angel Gala committee member.

"Havenwood was founded 21 years ago. In those 21 years we've helped more than 600 families rebuild their lives and the lives of their children. Having a safe place to live and offering educational opportunities breaks the cycle of poverty in our community," Cox said.

Havenwood serves some 50 families each year — 21 single parents and 19 children, with an average stay of nine months. Ac-

AT A GLANCE

**Camo and Couture
Angel Gala**

What: Dinner, dancing, live and silent auctions
When: 7-10 p.m. Feb. 14
Where: Bentonville DoubleTree Guest Suites
Tickets: \$100
Attire: Semi-formal, camouflage or couture suggested
Information: (479) 273-1060 or nwahavenwood.org

cording to the group's website, among available offerings are a life skill development program that includes learning about budgeting and money management, leadership, health and wellness, workforce enhancement and family dynamics and healthy relationships.

Melba Shewmaker is the gala's honorary chairwoman, and Evelyn Jorgenson, Northwest Arkansas Community College president,

will deliver the keynote address.

The benefit will feature live and silent auctions, dinner and dancing to live music by Maud Crawford.

Auction packages include a Cancun vacation, tickets to Disney World and a "Bros and Brews" package that includes a tour of Core Brewery in Springdale.

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Courtesy photo

Melba Shewmaker, Bentonville, is the honorary chairwoman of Havenwood's Camo and Couture Angel Gala, slated for Feb. 14 at the Bentonville DoubleTree Guest Suites.