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It was an open house for open hearts

By Vicki Randolph

Camp New Hope was filled with exactly that on Saturday: hope for the future of the camp, hope for the families who visit it, and hope for the community that hosts them both.

Camp New Hope is a hidden treasure located in Ashe County, off of Boggs Road, along the banks of the New River. It is a place where families with terminally ill children can come for a respite from the trials and challenges of daily life. It is a place where those families can go to forget about, if only for just a little while, what makes them so special.

The camp is getting ready to open its gate for the third season of welcoming families from North Carolina and many other states. But before the season gets underway, the staff and volunteers wanted to invite everyone from the community to see for themselves how remarkable it really is.

Dozens of people from the local area, as well as some from Charlotte, Greensboro and other distant towns came to Camp New Hope on Saturday to share in the festivities. There were chili dogs, chips and old fashioned homemade ice cream to get the party started.

Most everyone's favorite part of the day was the riding tours in the Bobcat off-road mini trucks. Kids piled in the seats and dust billowed from behind as the groups road up to the mountain top to enjoy panoramic views of the surrounding highlands. Breathtaking scenery is something Ashe County is famous for, but the mountain behind the camp's lodge provides one of the best vantage points around.

After Bobcat rides and tours of the lodge, guests were encouraged to visit the recently finished Chapel of Hope. Just entering the tiny building was enough to bring many to tears. It's hard to believe that only a few short weeks ago, the chapel was a disheveled tool shed filled with decades worth of discarded junk. Now, the tiny shed is no longer filled with trash, but with hope and prayers.

It's hard to describe the comforting aura yet heavy burden that exudes from its doors simultaneously. The softly playing music from the corner, the painting of a joyful Jesus carrying a smiling boy, a worn Bible on the altar, and streams of sunlight coming through a small stained glass window all combine to touch the hearts of those who enter.

Camp New Hope is a place like no other; it holds so much joy for families. In the face of what most others would think of as their worst nightmares, these families are amazing pillars of strength and inspiration. One father who recently lost his two-year-old son to Batten Disease actually said, "we are the lucky ones," when



Camp Director Randy Brown and her husband Chris are happy to have the third season at the camp underway. Photos by Vicki Randolph



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referring to the outpouring of love and support they've witnessed since their son's diagnosis and passing.

None of the families who come to the camp are angry. As a matter of fact, it is quite the opposite; they are full of laughter and joy and zest for life. They are making the most of every day and every experience with their children, because they know they won't always have the opportunity to do so.

One family from Concord North Carolina came back to the camp for the day, so they could share their story with visitors at the open house, and also to reminisce about their stay last summer. Chris and Wendy Hawkins, along with their sons Brandon and Jeremy, hold a special place in their hearts for this camp full of hope.

They brought with them a small tree to add to the landscape of Camp New Hope. It was the boys' idea, and they even got to choose the spot for its planting. Their little tree is the first of many that will grow along with the Garden of Hope.

The tree is a monument to their young lives and will continue to give life even after theirs on earth have ended. It will be a testimony to the world that these brothers continue to live on in spirit and in the hearts of every person they have come to know, despite the disease that promises to rob them of years they deserve. (Both of the Hawkins boys also have the fatal neurological disorder, Batten Disease.)

After the tree was planted, older brother Brandon delivered a speech and said a prayer, while his younger brother Jeremy spread soil with a shovel.

"Thank you all for coming," said Brandon. "And thank you, God, for the land, the sun, the clouds, the world, all the animals, the soil, the grass, the water and the fish."

That about covers it, except for thanks for the owners and workers of such a giving place and all they bring to the community and the lives of such extraordinary families. "Amen!"

To learn more about Camp New Hope and to view photos, go to www.CampNewHopeNC.org
To learn more about Batten Disease and the courageous children who battle it, visit www.BDSRA.org

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