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METROPOLITAN DESK

The Neediest Cases; Nine Operations Can't Break the Spirit of a Girl, 14

By MICHELLE O'DONNELL (NYT) 989 words

So, little Heather Smith is a bit of a ham. There she sits, nibbling on a lollipop, with the sweet but disengaged air of a teenage princess, as she listens to her mother and camp coordinator discuss, in appropriately low tones, her problems.

"She's had nine surgeries," her mother, Elsie Guilarte-Smith explains. "Her stomach was opened, her bladder opened. Her feet had to be uncurled."

Lick, lick. No reaction.

"We're well known at Wagon Road Camp," Ms. Guilarte-Smith continues, referring to a Chappaqua, N.Y., camp run by the Children's Aid Society that serves disabled children and others. The society is one of seven charities supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

"Heather's been going there since she was 4," Ms. Guilarte-Smith says.

"Four?" All lollipop activity is suspended. Heather, 14, looks incredulously at her mother.

"Uh, age 7," Camp Wagon Road's coordinator, Carol Mezger, whispers.

"Right, O.K., 7," Ms. Guilarte-Smith says. "There are horses there. And a new pool there."

"But not for us," Heather interjects.

"Well, there are two pools, and the new one is wheelchair-accessible," Ms. Mezger says with a smile.

"Yeah, but I didn't go in it," Heather points out. Suddenly, the payoff of those seven years of monthly visits to Wagon Road Camp becomes clear: Heather is free-thinking and independent, like just about any other sweet and rightly self-absorbed 14-year-old.

This is not to say that only Heather has benefited from all those visits, each one made possible with a \$510 donation from Neediest Cases and a \$15 subsidy from the state. A camp visit also means a weekend off for Ms. Guilarte-Smith, 38, who is single and Heather's de facto nurse.

When Heather was young Ms. Guilarte-Smith learned about the organization Sick Kids Need Involved People, also known as SKIP, which recommended that Heather attend Wagon Camp Road.

Ms. Guilarte-Smith used the weekends when Heather was away to study for a business degree. She now manages a Texaco service station in Pelham, N.Y. But money is still tight.

Heather has spina bifida, which affects her from the waist down. She must catheterize herself to urinate, and she has other internal complications and muscular difficulties. She takes a pharmacy of pills, and more surgery is in her future.

But at Wagon Road Camp, Heather has better things to think about. She can ride horses and catch up with her friends.

Her favorite horse was Magic, but camp administrators feared he was too spirited for children with special needs and gave him away. Heather still pines for him.

"But I liked him!" she tells Ms. Mezger.

Heather learned about love and loyalty from her mother. Ms. Guilarte-Smith kept her daughter when she was born, even though a doctor urged her to give up the baby for adoption, saying she would never walk. Ms. Guilarte-Smith and her husband separated, she said, after their relationship was strained by Heather's disability.

There's more.

Heather's medical expenses spiraled so high, Ms. Guilarte-Smith had to go on welfare to get health insurance. She and Heather lived in the only place she could afford: a rickety railroad flat in Yonkers. One day they returned home to find the apartment had been destroyed by a fire that had claimed the life of Gizmo Baby Smith, their cat.

Like her daughter, Ms. Guilarte-Smith does not give up easily. The fire was a blessing, she says. It forced her to make a half-dozen phone calls to politicians to accelerate her application for low-income housing after a decade-long wait.

Now she and Heather live with their new pet, a goldfish named Miracle, in a comfortable two-bedroom apartment in Yonkers subsidized by Section 8.

Heather leads a chatty tour of their new home, starting with her own bedroom, which is outfitted with stuffed animals, a massive jug of cheese puffs and posters of Avril Lavigne, her favorite singer. Like Ms. Lavigne, Heather is slight, with an attractive voice, which she demonstrates by singing "O, Holy Night" and hitting all the high notes.

Ms. Guilarte-Smith looks on, charmed, and thrilled, with her lively daughter.

"God doesn't give these kids to just anyone," she says.