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BACK CREEK VALLEY - Horse-lover Kaylee Schlaefli couldn’t wait to spend part of her summer vacation last year at Eagles’ Wings Girls and Horses, a local nonprofit organization that offers faith-based camps to girls wanting to learn more about horses – as well as themselves.

For a young woman who’d once decorated her bedroom with a horse motif, it was a dream come true.

She’d even helped save to pay for the week-long experience, one devoted to caring for, riding, and even communicating with horses while also learning about God.

But once there, Kaylee’s assigned horse Caesar (who was normally laid back and good with beginning riders) had other ideas. He consistently refused to move while she was riding, but wasn’t bothered by – and cooperated fully with – other campers.

Jeannie Hellem-Ramsey, who helped found the organization and now operates it with her husband Chris, couldn’t believe what she was seeing between the two, because it was unlike anything she’d previously experienced.

She didn’t want Kaylee to be disappointed, but wasn’t sure how to help bridge this gap or what caused it.

Patty Schlaefli, her mother and a nursing student, was equally puzzled, but took quick action after discussing the situation with Ramsey and ultimately discovering what was happening.

That’s because Kaylee had been secretly suffering with a sudden, increasingly debilitating headache – one she’d kept hidden out of fear of being unable to return to camp.

After initially being turned away with only a headache diagnosis, Patty returned and simply refused to leave until doctors agreed to do a brain scan.

“When Kaylee described how suddenly this had all happened, I knew that was key. Plus I will never forget her literally screaming in pain, so I wasn’t going to take no for an answer,” she said.

Looking back, Kaylee also know something was seriously wrong.

“It was my first day of camp and we were grooming the horses when I just felt like something had hit me in the head. Nothing was the same after that, because the pain was so intense,” she said, adding that Tuesday was worse and by Wednesday she couldn’t get out of bed.

She said Caesar simply wouldn’t move at all with her Tuesday, which was the same time her headache was getting much worse. Eventually, Kaylee could barely speak or follow directions because her brain couldn’t register what was happening, Patty said.

“I just remember people talking to me, but I didn’t understand what they were saying,” Kaylee said.

A brain scan revealed two aneurysms, including one that had ruptured and was bleeding, said Patty, blinking back teas as she recalled getting the doctors’ news

“They came out and said, ‘Do you like helicopter rides?’ And that is how they told us what was wrong, that Kaylee was going to be flown out of Hagerstown,” she said, adding that her daughter was immediately taken and admitted to Children’s National Hospital in Washington for nine days.

There was some good news, however, because a plug had formed that stopped the bleeding, but it was fragile and could have easily been dislodged, Patty said.

“The doctor said that with her being on a horse, and if she had been jostled while trotting, it could have also jostled loose that plug, which could have meant more bleeding and a lifelong problems. He kept talking about how differently this could have all turned out,” she said.

Although the problem was discovered in July, doctors had to wait for the swelling to subside and blood clots to reabsorb into her system. That meant they weren’t able to do a craniotomy – during which, ironically, a horseshoe-shaped incision was made to provide access to the brain – until October.

“It was incredibly risky surgery, especially since it was so close to her speech center and doctors said we just wouldn’t know how it had gone until Kaylee woke up and whether or not she could speak,” Patty said.

“Well, we were standing over her bed – praying and whispering – when Kaylee opened her eyes and said, ‘Would you guys keep it down? I’m trying to sleep here.’ I still remember laughing and crying as I called the doctor,” she said.

Despite this brush with death, Kaylee had an amazing recovery – she was released from the hospital about three days after her brain surgery – and didn’t have any residual problems. She didn’t even need any type of therapy.

But since doctors believe this problems was present at birth, neurosurgeons will continue to monitor Kaylee and she’ll have additional brain scans periodically to catch the development of another aneurysm, Patty said.

“It was a real blessing because I got out of the hospital on my birthday. All of the credit goes to God for my recovery. He gave the doctors their knowledge, but I also had amazing love from my family, church members and everyone at Eagles’ Wings because they all prayed for me,” said Kaylee, 13, who is now an eighth-grade student at Faith Christian Academy.

Everyone involved also credits Caesar, who was happy to see Kaylee when she returned to camp in July, they all agreed.

“God knew the entire story before it unfolded to us. And He used a mom’s wisdom, as well as her intuition, to help make sure Kaylee got the medical help she needed, but it started with Caesar. It’s really a big deal when God uses animals to help people, and sometimes we miss it, but not this time,” Ramsey said.

Timing is everything with God, she said.

“This is a true portrait of what a horse, prayers and love can do,” Ramsey said.