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Girls, God and Horses

*African teen soars at Eagles’ Wings*

JONES SPRINGS – Now more than 7,500 miles from home, Annerie Mare believes divine intervention delivered her to the Eagles’ Wings Girls and Horses program – a long-awaited trip from Africa she first began praying about two years ago after a chance online discovery.

That’s when her brother – who first saw the Eagles’ Wings website while randomly researching eagles – shared what he’d found since they both like eagles and live on an approximately 15,000 acre ranch named the Eagle’s Nest, Mare said, adding that her family also owns 30 horses. “But only 10 of those horses are tame; the rest are wild mustangs who come to drink water at our house,” she said.

No stranger to rural living, Mare, 18, has been home-schooled because her home in Namibia – which is bordered by Botswana to the east and South Africa to the south – is a three-hour drive to the nearest town. But her parents also home-schooled because “they wanted to equip me with God’s word,” she said.

And that influence has not been lost on Mare, who is eager to know more about God, his plans for her life and how she can help others. “If it is God’s will for me to work with girls one day; this will help me know how it is to be done with horses,” she said.

Right from the beginning, Mare liked what she learned online about Eagles’ Wings – a local faith-based, non-profit organization that has been working with young women from the Eastern Panhandle and surrounding states since the late 1990’s.

“The concept and design of Eagles’ Wings was to have a place where girls learned about God in an intimate way that allowed them to ‘become’ all that God has for them. In essence, a place where girls learn to soar,” the center’s website reads.

Programs – including week-long day camps as well as some with overnight trips- are open to girls 11-18 years old and they each teach something different. Horses are used to help participants better understand themselves as well as the world.

“Girls, God and horses” is the organizations guiding philosophy, said founder Jeannie Hellem, who cofounded the program in 1997 with her twin sister Carol Watts. She now runs the program with her husband, Chris Ramsey, at their home in rural northern Berkeley County.

Located on 20 acres, the couple’s land features private trails but is also close to state-managed Sleepy Creek Wildlife Management Area and Third Hill Mountain – a peaceful location that also helps campers to explore their lives while contemplating the future, Hellem said.

Hellem said she has seen firsthand how using biblical principles and teaching “the horse language” to young women has made a difference in their lives.

“Lots of people now refer to this as horse whispering, but there really is a lot we can learn from horses. Horse whispering teaches girls to be effective communicators and listeners. As a result, the girls are able to communicate and listen to what is really being said with people and horses through evaluation techniques used in the language of the horse. Essentially they also learn to be a people whisperer as well,” she said.

Learning about horses from the ground up also teahes girls to focus and develop much needed virtues in their lives, as well as establish healthy relationships and boundaries. Hellem said. Each of the couple’s horses has a special lesson to share with campers, she said.

The focus on spiritual growth is part of the reason her father finally agreed to let her make this long, solo international journey, Mare said.

“My dad trust God for everything, so he doesn’t just push us into a certain direction because it’s what he wants. I waited for the right time, after all that praying and this summer my dad said it would be the right thing to do if I know it was a Christian camp that would teach me Christian principles,” she said.

“In the end, my dad didn’t even read the website because he had total peace from God. My parents also know I have a passion for horses and felt strongly that this was the right place for me. But it was a big step of faith to send me alone, but it has worked out because this is a God walk,” said Mare, who arrived July 7 for her three-week adventure.

Faith is especially important in Africa, where governments are not always stable and the future can be uncertain for everyone, she said. Americans need to know how fortunate they are, Mare said.

“God has really blessed this country, especially compared to my country. I can just see how his grace is upon it and from the moment I arrived, I could feel his anointing on it,” she said.

Mare, who recently completed the horse passion camp, said she’s happy to be spending so much time with horses “learning how they fit into our small world and our walk with God.”

“It’s been an incredible experience to get to the point where you understand the herd and how they interact with each other. It takes lots of patience, but eventually you build a friendship with them that is like your friendship with God. Horses have an alpha member of the herd and that is not unlike how God is our alpha and our omega – we are to get under the authority of him,” she said.

Ramsey, smiled as he listened to Mare, nodding as she talked about how the camp has touched her life.

“Annerie already has so much of this intuitively, and that is very impressive. It also helps explain how she was was able to make this faith journey all the way from Africa. She has faith that will continue to grow even though her experience in Namibia is very different than what American girls are going through,” he said proudly.

Hellem predicted Mare will have a joyful future, adding, “She’ll be able to touch others no matter what she decides to do – whether it is through dance or horses – because she has a firm grasp on what God is trying to do in her life.”

While Mare has been learning, she’s also been a source of wisdom for her hosts and fellow campers, both Hellem and Ramsey agreed.

“Annerie loves our mountains in a very special way since they are so different from the hard, rock ones she’s known at home. And she was thrilled the other morning when it started raining, big fat raindrops that fell really hard for a little while. She really appreciates the lush greenery here that we sometimes tend to take for granted, because her own country is so dry and right now experiencing a severe drought,” Hellem said.

“She just has a very special way of looking at the world, and it has been a gift just to have her join us,” she said.