

HopeKids children earn a day on the lake

By Stephanie
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Minnetonka Power Squadron members Helen and Don Duncan donated their boat to the HopeKids event in 2013. They were one of many boats last year to take hopekids and their families to Big Island. (Submitted photo courtesy of the Minnetonka Power Squadron)

Event on Lake Minnetonka will host families of children with life-threatening illnesses

A day on the lake complete with a picnic, scavenger hunt, time with family and friends and private boat rides to and from Big Island in Lake Minnetonka could appeal to any child. On June 20, approximately 25 children with life-threatening illnesses will have the opportunity to do just that.

The nonprofit HopeKids will partner with the Minnetonka Power Squadron to give children with illnesses and their families a day of relaxation to take their minds off treatment and hospital stays and to help children feel like normal children.

HopeKids is an organization based on religious motivation to do good things for all people, especially those in need. HopeKids operates in Minnesota, Utah, Arizona and Texas helping to provide children and their families with fun activities at no cost.

HopeKids president Josh Taylor said HopeKids serves 2,750 families total across the four chapters, and in 2013, 975 families were served with 318 scheduled activities in Minnesota alone. Taylor believes in doing the right thing by these children no matter the family's race or religious affiliation.

“We believe the Bible tells us to care for those in need,” Taylor said. “We are completely open to any race, religion and ethnicity, the only qualifying characteristic is that there is a life-threatening illness.”

HopeKids works with organizations across the country to provide a wide variety of activities for children who are “hopekids.” There are several annual trips planned, such as to the Water Park of America, the Minnesota State Fair, Sever’s Corn Maze and each of a variety of professional sporting event.

Taylor said HopeKids focuses not only on the happiness of the children, but the happiness and health of the child’s parents and siblings too.

“We do date-nights for the parents as well,” Taylor said. “Often the one thing they neglect to take care of is themselves. It’s just all-consuming caring for a child with a life-threatening illness and they seem to always put everyone else first.”

At the third-annual HopeKids event on Lake Minnetonka June 20, nearly 100 hopekids and their families will be served.

Approximately 100 Minnetonka Power Squadron members volunteer to help at the event, 25 of those donating their boats to the cause. Boat owners chauffeur hopekids and their families to Big Island for a day of fun on the lake while the rest of the volunteers run craft stations, cook lunch and perform other duties.

Power Squadron Commander Tina Langhans has participated in HopeKids all three years and said nothing compares to the atmosphere or the happiness the families bring her.

“This event brings tears to your eyes,” Langhans said. “It is the most rewarding thing, both spiritually and mentally, that a person can do.”

Langhans looks forward to the event each year partly because of how unique it is to the squadron. She said they do a lot of civic projects, but this one is truly unique. Langhans said even though she gets a lot out of the event, it’s important to recognize that the day is all about the kids.

“It’s got to make them feel like kings and queens,” Langhans said. “It is so, so for the kids.”

Minnetonka Power Squadron Executive Officer Dave Fine said the HopeKids event on Lake Minnetonka is such a hit that some children and families unfortunately get turned away. Fine said there are only so many boats and so much room on the island.

“This year within two weeks of posting (volunteer) information on the website, everything was full,” Fine said. “The members enjoy it and are all anxious to be involved ... it definitely picked up.”

Many hopekids families have little to no free time outside their child’s treatment schedule, which can make it hard for them to make it to a lake or board a boat. Fine said he enjoys introducing families who have never been on a boat to boating.

“A lot of our families haven’t been on a boat before, so for many of them it’s a new experience,” Fine said. “It’s a good opportunity for people to experience the beauty of Lake Minnetonka and the kids definitely seem happy and smiley.”

Steve Camp, Minnetonka Power Squadron lieutenant, was the driving force behind the squadron’s involvement with HopeKids. Camp said he was watching the news one day when he saw a story about a sick child who, to his admiration, was still happy.

“They did a story on a child that was very sick, yet she was happy – smiling and positive – with tubes sticking out of her neck, nose and belly,” Camp said. “I thought about what I can do to help her and how many more of these little kids are out there and their families.”

Camp called the children’s hospital the next day and asked several people what he could do to help. He said he got his answer: HopeKids.

“I was given a contact name and a phone number. I called and, so, we are now here,” Camp said.

Similar to his squadron peers, Camp feels a deep connection to this event. He said at one of their first meetings on the topic, he was not the only person to be moved to tears.

Camp said it's important for people who have a little more than others to "share and help" other families feel special.

"These kids and young families really need HopeKids and groups like ours to offer a few hours a year to them to escape hospitals, needles and medical staff," Camp said.

Two doctors, a nurse and two certified lifeguards will be in attendance to make sure children and their families stay safe, Camp added.

As the catalyst behind the Minnetonka Power Squadron's involvement in HopeKids, Camp said he would like to thank the leaders of the organization personally someday – if they ever cross paths.

While the event on Lake Minnetonka is not open to the public out of respect for the privacy of the families, Camp encourages people to recognize the event and look into HopeKids if they are moved to do so.

"These kids are pretty resilient," Taylor said. "For a kid that's sick, this is exactly what they need to get out of the house and be a kid again."

The power squadron set a goal to raise \$5,000 to donate to HopeKids this year in honor of this event. Donors include various marinas on the lake, the Wayzata American Legion, Emerson Electric, Thrivent Financial and several other private and corporate donors.

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