

# Hartwell Partners with Children's Wish Foundation International to make a child's wish come true

When Hartwell park ranger Zach Harkness picked up the phone on a warm April day in 2011, he never thought he'd get an opportunity to grant the wish of a lifetime.

On the other end was Emily Dillard of the Children's Wish Foundation with an extraordinary request. The foundation, Emily explained, had received a Wish Fulfillment request from the family of Karrie Nichols, a 17-year-old girl with progressing spina bifida (a condition caused by incomplete development of the spinal cord).

The Children's Wish Foundation International is a nonprofit organization that grants wishes to children who have life-threatening illnesses. Formed in 1985, the foundation extends its reach to families across the globe and has created lasting memories for children in 53 countries.

The Nichols family had contacted the Foundation in hopes of giving Karrie the wish of her dreams. They felt Karrie's wish would raise her spirits and relieve her focus on the constant pain of her medical condition.

Karrie's wish was to spend a summer at her favorite place, Coneross Campground, which is owned and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District at the Hartwell Dam and Lake Project in Hartwell, Ga.

Now months later, the idea generated by one simple phone call has blossomed into an uncommon, yet wildly successful, partnership.

"As soon as we received the Wish Fulfillment Request, the Hartwell Lake staff made it a priority to help this very noble cause," Harkness said. "We were very careful in getting all the necessary approvals within the organization, including an overwhelming endorsement from the Savannah District Commander, Col. Jeff Hall. We did everything we could to expedite the request and make sure Karrie had her wish of a lifetime."



*Crews work to construct handicapped accessible site at Coneross Campground.*

The team considered removing a regular campsite from its inventory and modifying it to meet the child's needs, however, that approach would require the Corps to cancel all reservations made on the site. Instead, the team decided to build Karrie her own custom-designed campsite with a beautiful lakefront view. The Children's Wish Foundation agreed to cover the camping fees for the season.

Construction began May 15 and was finished June 11. The Hartwell team designed a fully accessible site based on the guidelines of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA). The site was specifically tailored to the needs of the handicapped taking into account the activities associated with the site, such as fishing, grilling, and lighting campfires.

As Karrie enjoys her summer camping and fishing at Hartwell Lake, the Corps is looking forward to helping more children like her. On Aug. 10, the Savannah District signed a district-wide Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Outdoor Dream Foundation, an Anderson, S.C.-based organization that provides outdoor adventures for terminally-ill children. Through this partnership, the Corps hopes to continue to help children in need by giving them the joys of a lakeside adventure.

"We crossed many hurdles and pulled together to do this for Karrie and many other children like her who want to experience their dreams," said Ryan Hartwig, natural resources program manager for the Savannah District. "Stories like this are the reason I joined the Corps of Engineers. We manage an extensive amount of lands and waters that provide recreation to the nation, but special partnerships like this allow us to bring a personal and meaningful experience to a child in need. We connect people with nature through therapeutic recreation, and create memories they will always cherish."



*Finished fully-accessible campsite*

For more information on the U.S Army Corps of Engineers Health/Medical Community Partnerships:

<http://corpslakes.usace.army.mil/partners/health.cfm>