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CONTACT: Patricia Klein
Public Relations Specialist

Good Shepherd Hospice
www.goodshepherdhospice.org

863-551-3941 (desk)

863-616-2890 (cell)

kleinp@goodshepherdhospice.org

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Eagle Scout commits to helping grieving children heal

LAKELAND, FLA. – At first glance, 17-year-old Sam McKendrick has little in common with astronaut Neil Armstrong, Microsoft founder Bill Gates and Academy Award-winning filmmaker Michael Moore. But taking a closer look, those four have reached a rare milestone – Sam and the others have achieved the highest rank in scouting. They all are Eagle Scouts. And for his Eagle Scout service requirement, Sam decided to make a difference in the lives of children dealing with the death of loved ones.

Sam is the oldest child of Lisa and Rich McKendrick of Lakeland. The George Jenkins High School senior has a quick smile and an unassuming presence. He has five younger sisters, and at school, he's on the swim team and the A Team, which engages in knowledge competitions with other high schools. He's thinking about his future and plans to attend Brigham Young University in Utah. But since joining the Boy Scouts eight years ago, scouting has played an important role in Sam's life. He is a member of Troop 776, sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Lakeland.

To reach the level of Eagle Scout, a scout must spearhead, from start to finish, a service project that shows leadership, guides others and leaves something tangible behind. Sam could have chosen any number of groups for his projects but according to his mom, he wanted to "find something meaningful." After weighing his options, Sam selected the Good Shepherd Hospice Bethany Center for Grieving Children and gave it his full attention.

That's not to say that Sam didn't run into a detour on his path to finishing his project.

Initially, Sam envisioned designing and building a grief garden for the Good Shepherd Hospice's George C. Forsythe Hospice House in Auburndale. The garden would offer a reflective atmosphere for families that had a loved one die while under hospice care. But property drainage issues forced Sam to re-evaluate his project.

Plan B

Sam didn't let this setback derail his plans for his hospice project, and he turned his attention to the Good Shepherd Hospice Bethany Center for Grieving Children. While consulting with Bereavement Manager Allyson Moskowitz, Sam learned that many times children use play to work through their grief. Before long, he had an idea for his backup plan – a puppet theater that counselors and volunteers can use at Camp Brave Heart, Good Shepherd Hospice's annual children's grief camp. In addition, the theater would be portable so Bethany Center staff could present puppet shows in the community.

Counselors and volunteers put on age- appropriate puppet shows that deal with the emotions grieving children can experience. One play centers on a little bear cub whose mother has died. The story goes on to tell how "Papa Bear" and other forest creatures provide the cub with love and support while he deals with his devastating loss. In this simpler format, children can connect and understand the meaning.

Before getting started, Sam recruited 17 others – fellow scouts, family and church members – to help him construct the theater. But before anyone in the group picked up a hammer or paintbrush, they all committed two hours to take a Good Shepherd Hospice volunteer orientation course to learn more about the organization that would benefit from the project. "If the whole group hadn't heard the training, they probably wouldn't have been willing to help with all the work," said Sam. "But since they heard it, they really wanted to help.

And Sam and his mother, Lisa, make an even greater commitment – they voluntarily took the longer, 20-hour volunteer training. Why? "That extra training taught me to understand and fully grasp the meaning of hospice and its role in our community," explained Sam.

Then the fun began. With materials discounted and donated from Lowe's, Sam oversaw all the details as they put in five long days to build the puppet theater. An artist friend illustrated the backdrop scenes of a castle in a magical forest. All totaled, Sam's group volunteered more than 200 hours to the project. On October 9, Sam and his family impressed Good Shepherd Hospice staff as they delivered the 4 foot by 6 foot theater to the Bethany Center.

A project with an impact

“The puppet theater is way beyond what we asked for,” said Moskowitz. “It’s so wonderful. It’s still up in our playroom because the kids don’t want us to take it down. They love it.”

Sam’s mother made an additional contribution to his project – she wrote a puppet play. Her story tells the tale of a princess who has trouble saying goodbye. She gets help from a magical unicorn who teaches the princess to make memories so saying goodbye is less difficult.

But along with helping the children who use Bethany Center services, the puppet theater project helped Sam learn more about many aspects of life and death. “I had to learn how to accept other’s ideas and use them in a project I planned,” said Sam. “Before we had the training, I never thought about dying...Now I understand that someone who is dying shouldn’t have to die without comfort and dignity.”

Sam’s mother is proud how her son’s project will make such an impact on children who are hurting. “This turned out to be a really good choice, and it has been such a positive experience for Sam,” she said. “He has seen how others value his accomplishments.”

But the Bethany Center’s connection with Sam and his Scout troop didn’t end when they dropped of the theater. Another Scout in Sam’s troop plans to make a smaller puppet theater for use inside the center. And Sam – he’s committed to setting up the theater at next year’s Camp Brave Heart so more area children can use it to learn to deal with their grief.

About the Good Shepherd Hospice Bethany Center for Grieving Children
The Good Shepherd Hospice Bethany Center for Grieving Children offers age-appropriate bereavement support for children, ages 6 to 17. All children and teens are eligible to participate in programs, whether or not the family used Good Shepherd Hospice in the past. For more information about Bethany Center programs, call 863-968-1739 or 800-464-3994.

About Good Shepherd Hospice

Good Shepherd Hospice is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that supports and serves more than 900 patients each day in Polk, Highlands and Hardee County as they face the challenges of life-limiting illnesses. Healthcare professionals and trained volunteers embrace the Good Shepherd Hospice mission to make the most of life by relieving the suffering of patients and their families affected by end-of-life issues. The organization has been a part of the community since 1979 and is a 2008 recipient of a Circle of Life Citation of Honor. Good Shepherd Hospice is the only local agency offering hospice programs accredited by the Joint Commission, the nation's premier healthcare accrediting body. The United Way of Central Florida partially funds the community programs offered by Good Shepherd Hospice. For more information, please visit the website at www.goodshepherdhospice.org

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Photo Caption:

Sam McKendrick of Lakeland shows off the puppet theater he created for the Good Shepherd Hospice Bethany Center for Grieving Children as part of his Eagle Scout service project. The 200-hour project resulted in a theater that will help grieving children learn to cope with the death of a loved one.