



TETON SCIENCE SCHOOLS / COURTESY PHOTOS

Participants of the 2012 Children's Grand Adventure learn to use GPS devices with Teton Science Schools instructor Jacob Grace.

Natural *therapy*

Texas kids who have fought cancer spend time healing in Tetons.

By Johanna Love

After months or years of treatment for cancer, child patients often can't see beyond the horizon of the hospital.

Each summer the Children's Grand Adventure, a nature therapy trip to Jackson Hole, hosts about a dozen children who are in remission or past their primary course of treatment.

As soon as the kids reach the airplane door and breathe the crisp mountain air, a transformation begins, said Dr. David Poplack, director of Texas Children's Cancer Center in Houston.

"Many of these patients have recently come off of chemotherapy," Poplack said, "and for the past two or three years have had virtually no control over their lives."

Each July kids in the program are immersed in nature during their nine days in the valley, from canoeing on String Lake to camping in Yellowstone National Park. They enjoy the stillness, the sunshine, wildlife watching and freedom from beeping, bustling medical visits. They gain confidence and maturity and begin to make plans for the future.

"In many ways they go through a personal renaissance," Poplack said. "If you're going to have a rebirth in life, can you think of a better place to have it than Jackson Hole? They come face to face with the idea there's a whole big world out there."

Although the results of such a program are hard to quantify scientifically, Poplack, a pediatric oncologist



Pediatric cancer survivors canoe on String Lake in July.

for more than 40 years, said the Grand Adventure is part of a holistic approach.

"We can treat the children, but to have them heal takes more than just the medications we give them," Poplack said. "This experience has a major impact in terms of improving their quality of life, their outlook, their confidence, giving them a positive attitude. I think there's a tremendous benefit to it."

Sydney Marquis, a 13-year-old survivor of acute lymphoblastic leukemia, had the time of her life this summer, she said in a blog post she wrote for Texas Children's Hospital. After a bone marrow transplant two years ago she was "isolated from the world," she said. On the trip she

bonded with other kids who had fought cancer.

"They know exactly what I've been through and understand me more than anybody," she wrote.

For most of the program's participants, just getting outside Houston — "the city of orange barrels," as medical chaperone Dr. Mona Shah put it — can have a huge effect.

"Being out of the state," Shah said, "being outside, just being able to sit in the dirt is a big deal for a lot of these kids."

One teenage girl with a blood disorder had never been outside of Houston, Shah said. She was halfway up to Inspiration Point in Grand Teton National Park when she realized she was afraid of heights.

"She discovered that on the side of a mountain," Shah said, but "she let us talk her through it. She sat on top of 7,000 feet and couldn't express how blessed she felt to have made it that far."

Since then the teen has applied to colleges and set goals for herself — things she wasn't doing before the trip.

"She really has changed her direction and perspective," Shah said. "She says, 'Well, I climbed to the top of the mountain, what else can't I do?'"

Teton Science Schools expedition leaders treated the kids like regular kids, not fragile medical patients, Shah said.

"They appreciated just being one of a group of kids," Shah said.

Parents of the cancer survivors also benefit from the program, Shah said.

"Many of them have not left their child's side for a minute for months or years," Shah said.

While their child is gone they begin to relax and realize that their child can survive, even thrive, in a safe space with other kids.

"Most teenagers are not meant to spend 24 hours a day with their parents," Shah said. "To get them away is a huge thing."

The Children's Grand Adventure was founded in 2008 by Houston native Stacey Kayem, who now splits her time between there and Jackson Hole. After working with Teton Science Schools she realized that the nonprofit nature education program would be the perfect partner for Texas Children's. Poplack agreed, and the entities have been partnering since.

Grand Adventure officials would like to expand the program, bringing kids to the Tetons in March as well as July. To learn more or to donate, visit TheGrandAdventure.net.