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## 'Champ' makes her day

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Just a day after she was diagnosed with leukemia, Olivia Valk told the Make-A-Wish Foundation she wanted her very own horse.

Exactly a year later, 11-year-old Olivia got her wish. On Saturday, the foundation surprised Olivia, a fifth-grader at Our Lady of the Assumption in Beloit, with the news that she was now the owner of a horse named Champ.

"I was really shocked," she said after hearing the news. "My parents said no at first."

But they changed their minds after seeing how much Olivia loved horses and wanted one of her own. So they started looking around, and Olivia soon set her sights on Champ because he was the calmest of all the horses she researched.

"I feel really excited," she said as she and her friends waited for the pizza to arrive Saturday afternoon.

That morning, Olivia's parents told her she and her friends were taking a trip to Magic Waters in Rockford. With their swimsuits on underneath their clothes, the four friends waited to leave for the water park. But then, a car with two members of the Make-A-Wish Foundation pulled up in the driveway. A stunned and excited Olivia watched as bags of presents made their way from the trunk of the car to her house.

As Olivia sat with piles of presents around her, her mother, Jody Valk, leaned down and whispered in her ear that she'd get to meet Champ later that day. Olivia couldn't speak as she stared at her mother wide-eyed and open-mouthed. After getting over her initial shock, she dove into the presents while her friends and family members watched happily. Among the gifts were riding gear and everything she'd need to take care of her new horse. Olivia's 7-year-old sister, Jillian, even got presents of her own.

Olivia, who hopes to become an animal veterinarian, had wanted a horse ever since she began riding with her former librarian. She had been dreaming of Champ for nearly a year.

"This gives Olivia something to hope for," Jody said.

The last year has been hard for Olivia and her family, which is why getting Champ means so much to her, Jody said. A year ago, Olivia fainted and was taken to the emergency room. She hadn't been feeling well, but her parents couldn't put their fingers on what was wrong. Eventually she was diagnosed with leukemia and started treatment at the UW Health American Family Children's Hospital in Madison. She still has a year and three months left of treatment, but she's through the most difficult part, Jody said.

For a while, Olivia couldn't see her friends, so her family bought her a computer and cell phone to keep in contact with them. It was a rough year, but things are certainly looking up. The family has learned to accept the diagnosis and has found "a new normal in our lives," Jody said.

"We're trusting God to take care of her and we're helping her deal with her emotions," she added.

When the stable door opened Saturday afternoon, Olivia eagerly slipped inside to meet her new horse. She lovingly stroked Champ's nose and gave him a kiss as her family looked on with tears in their eyes. Champ



Eleven-year-old Olivia Valk smiles happily with her new horse, Champ. Valk, who was diagnosed a year ago with leukemia, told the Make-A-Wish Foundation just a day after her diagnosis that she wished for a horse. Exactly a year later, the foundation granted her wish when they surprised Olivia at her home with brand new riding gear and the news that she is now Champ's owner.

Staff photo by Sara Siekierski

will stay at Stone Ledge Boarding in South Beloit, so Olivia can go visit and ride him as often as she wants.

Jody had nothing but kind words to say as she thanked the Make-A-Wish Foundation for making her daughter's wish come true and all of the businesses and people who support the foundation.

"You can't imagine what this does for a child," she said.

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