



PONOKA STAMPEDE

★ WILD WEST OF '36 ★

Quebec Boy's Wish Comes True at Ponoka Stampede

By Amber Swedgan

For Immediate Release, July 6, 2023 - Darby, an aspiring cowpoke from Gracefield, Quebec, had his wish to be a cowboy granted at this year's 87th Ponoka Stampede.

The eight-year-old was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor . Darby bravely underwent a 16-hour operation, followed by daily radiation and weekly chemotherapy. The ambitious boy had to relearn his motor skills, including eating, talking, walking and writing. Why not add learning to be a cowboy to that list?

His wish was realized by Make-A-Wish® Canada, in cooperation with stampede organizers, who took the boy under their wing and gave him the experience of a lifetime.

THE EXPERIENCE

First stop was Jones Boys Western Wear. If you're going to be a Cowboy, you need to look the part and boy did he go to the right place. The team at Jones Boys Western Wear in Red Deer was ready and waiting for Darby and his family. They made sure he was suited up in the finest western apparel. All dressed and ready to go, the first of many magical surprises was presented, a Championship Ponoka Stampede Belt Buckle" engraved with Darby's name.

Next up, meeting our Stampede Superhosts, Dan and Karen Skeels of Anchor D Ranch. Dan is a World Champion Livestock Auctioneer, his wife Karen, the best of the best in hospitality with their daughter, Mackenzie, Miss Ponoka Stampede in 2022 who is now the 2023 Miss Rodeo Canada. Darby and his family couldn't have landed in better western hands for the week.

The Skeels toured Darby and his family to the Vold's Ranch to meet award winning Vold Rodeo bucking bulls and then over to the famous Chuckwagon camp and barn of the Dorchesters. The Skeels hosted Darby and his family at their private Anchor D Ranch VIP suite for the evening Chuckwagon performance where Darby could have a bird's eye view of what he was going to be a part of over the next few days.

The following day started early. Darby found himself at the Vold, Jones, Vold Auction Mart, front and center of the sale ring assisting in a live auction with world champion auctioneer Dan Skeels. From there he slipped on his new bullfighting jersey, compliments of Brett Monea and met the team of Ponoka Stampede Bullfighters, Brett Monea, Ty Prescott and Tanner Byrne. Obviously not fighting live cattle, Darby experienced a safe and engaging introduction to the sport of bullfighting. Darby experienced a full session of learning how the bullfighters protect the cowboys by distracting bulls and how they intervene if a cowboy is in danger and how they



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safely help the bull exit the arena. A morning he will never forget filled with games, simulation and fun.

Next, the moment Darby had been anxiously awaiting, climbing up and settling into the saddle of a horse at the 87th Ponoka Stampede. A special 'thank you' to former Miss Ponoka Stampede Ashley Akkermans who taught Darby all the basics and safety of being a Cowboy to prepare him for his grand entry into the arena joined by professional wranglers and escorted by the finest rodeo royalty for his debut and introduction to over ten thousand Stampede fans. What a moment! The crowd went wild for Darby.

After the rodeo performance, Darby met 3x Cancer Survivor, past President of the Ponoka Stampede and Director of the Board, Blair Vold, who left him with three words, "NEVER GIVE UP!"

What is a trip to the Ponoka Stampede without a visit to the West Coast Amusements Midway? Thank you to Midway owner, Robbie Hauser for the VIP midway passes for Darby and his entire family. Darby enjoyed an afternoon of rides, water gun racing, balloon popping and left with an armload of teddy bears. From the water gun racing, back to the Chuckwagon races.

Just when you think he has had the best day in his life, the legendary country music artist, Corb Lund, waved his magic wand and surprised Darby with a Meet and Greet including a private mini concert backstage. An experience like no other. Darby had a chance to meet so many great folks including MLA Jason Nixon.

The final day of his cowboy adventure was Parade Day at the Ponoka Stampede, where Superhost Dan Skeels chauffeured Darby in the parade through the fan-filled streets of Ponoka. Darby, waving and smiling to the spectators of the 3-mile Downtown Ponoka Stampede Parade.

After the parade, Darby returned to the Ponoka Stampede grounds for his "final act". Award Winning "CrAsh Cooper" the famous Ponoka Stampede Rodeo Clown rolled out his red barrel and his make-up bag to surprise Darby with an unimaginably fun day as his prodigy. Complete with a red and white striped shirt, cut off blue jeans held up with suspenders.

"If more people lived life with the zest and curiosity that Darby has, the world would be a much better place," says Cooper. "I'm not sure who enjoyed the time we spent together more, Darby or myself. He really liked dressing up as a rodeo clown and performing for the audience. And we also had fun riding on top of the stagecoach together in the arena waving at all the fans."

"He was game to try anything, and everything, and he wasn't going to miss a thing. Even when he must have been thoroughly exhausted, he never turned down an opportunity to live life to the fullest. Thank you, Darby for inspiring me to live a fuller life!" Cooper stated.



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Darby looked fantastic. There is something so magical about being a Rodeo Clown and Darby experienced what it was all about from the behind-the-scenes preparation of make-up application, to being inside the famous clown barrel, dancing and entertaining the crowd. Darby's farewell to the Ponoka Stampede was a fly-by on top of the Stagecoach horse drawn carriage waving to the thousands of Stampede fans.

"There was so much magic made for our son and family this week. We can't thank the Ponoka Stampede and Make-A-Wish Canada enough. Darby really enjoyed the variety of activities from riding into the arena with the cattle raffle herd to being a real Rodeo Clown apprentice" says his father, Pat Sullivan.

The Ponoka Stampede would like to thank everyone who participated in making Darby's wish come true, including G & T Custom Farming, Versatile Energy, EXP Realty, and the Sutter Family for hosting the Make-A-Wish family. And a big Ponoka Stampede thank you to Dan and Karen Skeels, we couldn't have done it without Dan and Karen's execution and expertise.

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ABOUT MAKE-A-WISH CANADA:

Make-A-Wish® creates life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses. We are on a quest to bring every eligible child's wish to life because a wish is an integral part of a child's treatment journey. Research shows children who have wishes granted can build the physical and emotional strength they need to fight a critical illness. As an independently operating affiliate of Make-A-Wish International, Make-A-Wish Canada is part of the network of the world's leading children's wish-granting organization. We serve children in every community in Canada, and in more than 50 countries worldwide. In 2023, Make-A-Wish Canada is proudly celebrating 40 years of wish granting, having granted more than 37,000 wishes since 1983, with over 1,000 of them last year alone. For more information about Make-A-Wish Canada, visit makeawish.ca.

The [Ponoka Stampede and Exhibition Association](#) is home to the largest seven-day professional rodeo in Canada featuring some of the largest prize draws in professional rodeo.

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