

UAB PARTNERS WITH EARTH'S "MOST PERFECT PLACE"

BY LYN SCARBROUGH

"It is the most perfect place on Earth. The most wonderful sight is observing the campers about one hour after they arrive at camp. At first all of them feel lost, but after that first hour every one of them has a look of peace about them after finding out they are not alone and have friends going through the exact same thing."

— Julia Basset, "Camp I Believe" Director

"The most perfect place on Earth."

That's mighty high praise, but referring to Children's Harbor, there's a lot of truth to that description.

The Children's Harbor Lake Martin campus, nestled along the picturesque wooded shoreline of Alabama's largest lake, is hard to match anywhere.

But, the beauty of Children's Harbor is found more in what it does than in its unsurpassed pristine setting.

From the beginning, the Children's Harbor mission was simple ... strengthen children and their families. But, that brief statement doesn't adequately explain the difference the organization makes in thousands of lives every year.

Founded in 1989 by Ben and Luanne Russell, Children's Harbor was established to serve seriously ill children and their families. Those people are offered two unique environments in which to bond, find balance and support at a time when it's needed most due to hospitalization and medical challenges.

In addition to the Lake Martin location, the Family Center, located in the Benjamin Russel Hospital for Children in Birmingham, offers counseling care, educational resources and activities. About 25,000 people annually visit the Family Center.

More than 4,500 campers are served by the Lake Martin campus each year where they can enjoy camping and retreat services. There are camps for children with specific illnesses — cancer, hemophilia, spinal injury, autism and others. Over 90,000 children and families have benefited from the Lake Martin experience since 1989.

All services offered at both Children's Harbor locations are provided to the families at no cost, thanks in large part to donors and volunteers who work with the organization. It partners with more than 20 groups to serve long-term seriously ill children.

Among the latest groups to become a Children's Harbor partner is UAB Football.

"Our players and coaches have a special connection to Birmingham, and we have a strong desire to give back to this community which continues to do so much for us," Blazers head coach Bill Clark said. "An uncommon sense of family defines our identity as a program, and in a short amount of time, Children's Harbor has absolutely become a part of the Blazer family."

The partnership started in January, 2016. Since then, players and coaches have coordinated with Children's Harbor for events including Super Bowl, Valentines and March Madness parties, as well as a Lego build.

"These players are their heroes," said

Children's Harbor CEO Myrle Grate. "To get a chance to interact with them one-on-one is a dream-come-true for these patients. The football team inspires them not to give up even when things get tough with treatments because they never gave up hope that the UAB football program would come back."

This partnership is an example of the impact that UAB football can have in the community and reflects the type program being put together on Birmingham's Southside, according to Tommy Brigham, a founding member of the UAB Athletics Foundation and a recognized Birmingham civic leader.

"When you think about the impact that both UAB football, and even more importantly, Children's Harbor, can and will have on our city, state and region, you know that it was the right thing to do as a community to bring UAB football back," Brigham said. "The future is bright for Birmingham because of the business community decision to invest in UAB football. Now, the future is even brighter for the kids that UAB players will love and invest in at Children's Harbor."

Brigham pointed out UAB's significance to the Birmingham area.

"UAB is the most important economic engine in our city, region and state," he said. "We knew that for UAB to continue its powerful trajectory as a comprehensive university in undergraduate and graduate growth, we simply had to have a strong and vibrant athletic program, including a competitive football team.

"We felt strongly that Coach Clark was uniquely qualified to mold and shape the program into a national story that will bring positive attention to Birmingham. His strong emphasis on developing players into men of high character and role models would resonate with attracting great student athletes. His decision to adopt Children's Harbor as the organization for his team to embrace only substantiated why we felt as we did about Bill as the right man to lead UAB into the future."

"I intend for this relationship to grow with our program," Clark said. "As we build our team and return to competition, there will be even more we can do to provide encouragement and a positive distraction to support this terrific work."

Children's Harbor and UAB Football ... the perfect place, the perfect partnership.

