

## **GUARDIAN ANGEL : Andrea Jaeger Still Gives Everything She Has, but Now She Gives It to Ailing Children**

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It's her body. They are making fun of it. The other top professionals look at the underdeveloped figure and laugh, a teenage girl turned freak of nature.

Andrea Jaeger walks out of the locker room and into a public restroom. For much of the rest of her career, that is where she will dress.

Sixteen years later, an uncertain teenager is lifting her shirt again.

Her name is Pam. She wears a pair of bright boxer shorts on her head to hide her baldness. She reveals a recent cancer surgery scar that winds around her pale abdomen like a zipper.

Andrea Jaeger does not whisper, does not laugh.

She asks Pam about the scar. Asks if it hurts. Asks if it scares her.

Jaeger peers at this girl who has been given no chance of surviving a massive tumor in her chest.

Respect and hope. The concepts have replaced serve and volley in the life of America's most charitable former pro athlete.

Jaeger preaches it daily during her camps for children with life-threatening illnesses, camps that become clubs that become families.

Respect and hope. She talks it at 10 a.m. for a child afraid to take off his wig for a swim . . . at 2 p.m. for the child afraid of skiing with his chest-implanted medication port . . . at midnight for those children who are afraid, period.

Respect and hope are the only currency now for a woman who has traded fame and riches for the full-time company of the young and dying.

Jaeger is asked why she would make such a deal.

It is that 15-year-old who answers.

"I'd be getting dressed before big tennis matches, and fans would find me in the public restrooms and slip autograph slips underneath my stall.." she says.

"Andrea feels she lost a lot of her childhood on the tour. . . . This is her second chance," said Evert, a part-time Aspen resident. "For the first time, she is in her element. She is home."

That home is not the chalet, or the city, but a mythical place that is host to real children.

Jaeger and her unlikely team of five have been host to kids with life-threatening illnesses from around the country.

The kids come, all expenses paid, for things like rafting and horseback riding in the summer, skiing and snowball fighting in the winter.

There are kickball games, dance contests, water basketball and a lot of just hanging around.

Kids talking about hair loss. Kids talking about the moment the phone rang with the news that made their parents cry.

Kids talking to some of the only other kids in the world who would understand. "The people here don't call me Leukemia Master, they don't call me Baldy," said Justin Romano, 12, of Roseville, Mich. "I once pushed a kid's face into his salad because he made fun of me. Here, I can make friends."

Jaeger understands.

"I was different all of my life; I know what that's like," she said. "I never had a peer group. Neither do these kids. Until they get here."

Jaeger takes an extra step that further separates her unconventional camp from dozens of other retreats.

Before the children fly home, they are given a toll-free number, enabling them to phone Jaeger or team members at her home at any time.

It is as if, a week after taking their first uncertain steps into this high altitude, they are welcomed into a well-grounded family that will remain with them for life. And in death.