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Audubon Aquarium of the Americas Partners With Heart of Passion Leaders to Host Special Day for Teens With Cancer

(New Orleans, La.) - Teenagers with cancer enjoyed a very special day during a visit to Audubon Aquarium of the Americas on Tuesday, July 10.

In partnership with the non-profit Heart of Passion (HoP), the Aquarium hosted teens with cancer from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama as part of an annual four-day, three-night Red Carpet Day Retreat (RCD) in New Orleans.

The day at Audubon Aquarium of the Americas kicked off with a before-hours "Breakfast with the Sharks" in front of the Gulf of Mexico exhibit, followed by a tour of the Aquarium.

The Red Carpet Day Retreat took place from July 9 through July 12 and marked the 8th anniversary of RCD in New Orleans. In addition to the visit to the Aquarium, this year's itinerary included a private tour of a local movie studio, a visit to the New Orleans Saints training facility in Metairie, VIP makeup appointments at Saks Fifth Avenue and a dinner and dance on the Paddlewheeler Creole Queen that featured a DJ and a photo booth.

The four days of events are designed to help guests forget the worries of hospitals and daily life, create lasting memories and foster strong emotional bonds among fellow teens who have cancer or have survived it.

"Teenagers should be building friendships, getting to know who they are as people and exploring their independence," said Hannah Dimmitt, certified child life specialist and Regional Program Manager/Young Professional Mentor for Heart of Passion.

"Being diagnosed with cancer as a teenager can take away many of these opportunities due to treatment schedules, missed school and missed opportunities to socialize. RCD is intended to provide guests with a sense of normalcy and fun while also being around peers who are going through similar experiences or challenges."

Heart of Passion's Red Carpet Retreat takes a "for teens from teens" approach that serves the guests while providing practical training to local high school leaders through the organization's Leadership Development Program (LDP).

The 2017-2018 New Orleans cohort consists of 10th-12th graders from Metairie Park Country Day School, Louise S. McGehee School, Isidore Newman School and Academy of the Sacred Heart.

This unique, intensive year-long program offers high school students an opportunity to experience life in the business world while learning about compassion as they plan and execute Red Carpet Day.

Students like AK Aluise, a second-year leader, say the program not only helps “develop useful professional skills, but also allows us to get to know our peers and make a positive difference in their lives. Heart of Passion has allowed me to forge new friendships, cultivate leadership skills and learn many new values. It has been an incredibly influential aspect of my high school experience.”

Since its founding in 2002, Heart of Passion has hosted 22 Red Carpet Day Retreats for teens with cancer in Atlanta, Dallas, Charlotte and New Orleans, serving more than 450 patients in those regions. The last 13 retreats have been the culmination of HoP’s Leadership Development Program, which now boasts more than 150 graduates.

Through these two programs, Heart of Passion’s dual mission strives to instill a love of community engagement in the next generation of community leaders while tearing down the walls that cancer builds socially and emotionally for teens.

For more information on Heart of Passion and its programs visit heartofpassion.org or facebook.com/HeartofPassion

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Audubon Nature Institute operates a family of museums, parks and research facilities dedicated to celebrating the wonders of nature. Through innovative live animal exhibits, education programs, and scientific discovery, Audubon makes a meaningful contribution to preserving wildlife for the future. Audubon Nature Institute flagships include Audubon Park, Audubon Zoo, Audubon Aquarium of the Americas, Entergy Giant Screen Theater, Audubon Butterfly Garden and Insectarium, Audubon Louisiana Nature Center, Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center, Woldenberg Riverfront Park and Audubon Wilderness Park. Ron Forman is President and CEO of Audubon Nature Institute.

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