

# Founders tell the origin of **Eagle Mount**

**E**agle Mount began a very long time ago. Both Bob and I received a legacy to help disadvantaged people. Our mothers both spent much of their lives helping others. One was a welfare worker; the other volunteered in hospitals and nursing homes. - Greta Mathis



*Founders Greta and Bob Mathis.*

The seeds were planted for me in my senior year at Montana State College when I received a scholarship to a special child development school in Detroit. I studied all aspects of children's growth and development. I spent time teaching in the school's research pre-school and teaching and volunteering in the settlement houses in the poor neighborhoods—as well as attending juvenile court sessions. The professors were on the cutting edge of mental retardation and physical therapy. I was privileged to have studied under them.

After graduating from Montana State College, I was awarded an internship at the University of Illinois to teach in a research pre-school for disabled and disadvantaged children. The research was directed at determining if enriching the environment by recreation, special teaching methods, and nutritional enhancement would actually improve the behavioral and mental problems. The children ran the gambit of disabilities—developmentally, physically or emotionally challenged or all three. The teaching was

both challenging and rewarding. I formed strong bonds with the children. After a year of being privileged to work with them, I was “hooked.” I knew I wanted to be involved with exceptional people—for the rest of my life!

While at the University of Illinois, I met and married the then Lieutenant Bob Mathis. He shared my dreams of helping these very special people. The children “rubbed off” on him too. Throughout his 34-year Air Force career, there were many opportunities for us to be involved. I helped to set up a special school, helping to teach and recruit volunteers. I volunteered and substituted in pre-schools in several of the places where we lived. At that time, many of the children and adults with disabilities were either institutionalized or kept at home.

Bob and I believed that visiting them, helping with recreation, having parties, playing games and reading to them would enrich their lives. We learned how much of a difference “hands-on” activities made in their development. We often talked about doing “something” more

significant when Bob left the Air Force. Our ideas began to take form several years before his retirement.

### *Bob Mathis continues the story...*

I knew that I would reach mandatory retirement in 1983 after 35 years in the Air Force. I started investigating the possibility of starting a foundation that would improve the lives of those with disabilities. Then about a year before I was scheduled to retire, I decided to leave early and get on with setting up a “camp” for people that needed our help. I wasn't sure where we would geographically locate. I knew I wanted to live somewhere in the Rocky Mountain region since I had visited both Bozeman and Albuquerque many times and had fallen in love with the mountains.

My first step was to come to Montana to perform a study of the needs of an area. We soon determined that Bozeman was a place that would benefit from programs

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*“The dream that Greta and I shared many years ago continues to grow and amaze us.” - Bob Mathis*



## The Eagle Mount Dream Is Now a Growing Reality

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for persons with disabilities. Meantime, while still in the Air Force, I started the I Am Third Foundation and prepared to have it declared tax-exempt by the IRS. Incidentally, the name came from Greta's father who taught Sunday School and was familiar with the I Am Third passage from the Bible: where Jesus explains that we should put God first in our lives and our fellow man second. A good way to remember this thought: keep yourself in third place.

In 1982, Greta and I moved to Bozeman and started to build the foundation. We still lacked a name for the organization or programs that the foundation would operate. However, after a large family gathering our nephew, Craig Gay, suggested the name Eagle Mount, from Isaiah 40:31, "They shall mount up on wings of Eagles..."

We were off and running...but had no staff, no board of directors, no program, and no money! After awhile, the IRS decided we could be trusted and made us a tax-exempt organization.



Our first program was downhill skiing.

### The first steps

The first step in building the foundation was assembling a dedicated board of directors who would share our interest. Their only compensation would be to feel good about helping those with special needs. Naïve about raising money, a number of people thought we were a "pie in the sky" organization when we approached them for financial assistance. We slowly worked toward building the organization with a small group of committed board members. Then in spring 1983, I was invited to speak about our foundation at the Governor's Prayer Breakfast in Helena. My military career

had not taught me much about raising funds for a non-profit but I did know that we needed to publicize our effort.

Our son Harry called early that summer from seminary and said he wanted to come to Bozeman to help us get our programs started. We didn't have much money but now we had an executive director. Paying him would be another challenge. We were able to support Harry and his family with the earnings I was making while working on my brother-in-law's ranch and some help from my retirement pay. Additionally, I was raising some money.

About a month after Harry joined us, he announced that he had found the ideal person to run the programs. He said that Cyndi Fonda wanted to join us as she had a similar dream as ours. I took the matter to the board of directors. Somewhat stunned, one directors said, "I will pay her first month's salary, and another said, "And I will take care of the second month." We were off and running, well at least walking.

Shortly thereafter, Cyndi and Harry came to the board and explained that a camp was unnecessary. They emphasized the need to start the programs first - that the first should begin that fall for handicapped skiers. We had picked up the pace a bit. We anticipated about 20 or so skiers for the winter of 1983-84. But after Cyndi and Harry went into action, 94 disabled skiers and over a hundred volunteers had signed up to help others enjoy the slopes. We had gone from planning to putting our dream into action.

By spring 1984, we had set up a horseback riding (hippotherapy) program with a number of riders. We borrowed horses and found a riding arena in Sedan, Montana, (some 20 miles away) where we could operate. A second successful program!

As we started showing people that we were being successful developing programs and also operating them, we found that more people were willing to help us financially. When I had spoken at the Governor's prayer breakfast, a state senator from Billings, Montana came over to me and said, "When you need some help, how about coming to see me?" So before we started the horseback program, I packed Cyndi and Harry into my car and we headed for Billings. The upshot of the

meeting with Senator Bruce Crippen was that he agreed to support Eagle Mount for as much as we needed for the next year. As he put it, "You need an angel to help you until you learn something about fundraising. I will be your angel for the next year." He literally saved us from extinction.



Stephanie Conant swims with volunteers in 1987

### The dream takes flight

With improvement in our cash flow, we were able to add an aquatics program that has grown over the years and is our only year round activity, offering therapy to between 150 and 200 clients. In summer 1985 we hosted the Sunshine Kids of Houston, Texas in the Big Sky community south of Bozeman. This was the beginning of the Big Sky Kids program for children suffering with cancer. The program has flourished and presently offers three cancer camps for different aged youth.

The Bozeman center also offers programs in ice skating, golf, kayaking, fishing and gardening as the need arises.

Along the way, a group in Billings heard about our skiing program and asked for help to start such a program at Red Lodge, Montana to service the young people there. This successful program launched another Eagle Mount center.

Very shortly thereafter, still another Eagle Mount Center was started in Great Falls. For a number of years, these programs have served hundreds of disabled people in Montana. Next came Eagle Mount-Missoula, and just this past year, Eagle Mount-Helena came into being.

The dream that Greta and I shared many years ago continues to grow and amaze us. The staff, the members of the board of directors, volunteers, and supporters have made our dream a reality.