

# A ranch for minds and hearts

*Project in Holland to help needy children under way*

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Andrew Watson and his wife, Marla, had a vision to create a safe haven for abused and neglected children. They wanted to build a ranch where children could run and play in wide open spaces, live with a real family, feel loved and just be children.

A ceremonial groundbreaking was held Monday for the Soaring Wings Ranch, which is on 195 acres at Holland. It will be a home for children ages 6 to 18, most of whom have never lived in a stable, loving family.

The children will live with 24-hour house parent couples in a family atmosphere. They will receive counseling and may be reunified with their families if it is in the child's best interest. When reunification is not possible, the child will live at the ranch until adulthood. They will be encouraged to excel in school, participate in extracurricular activities and either learn a trade or go to college upon graduating from high school.



Jason Fowler, Jason Pederson, Marshall McKissack, Jim Hawks, Jenifer Kendrick, Audrey Kendrick surround Andrew Watson and the plans for Soaring Wings Ranch, a home for abused and neglected children. Watson and the board of directors have been working on the project for three and a half years. COURTNEY KUHLEN PHOTO

Because the ranch will not rely on state or federal funding, there will be a thorough screening process to ensure the safety of all children

at the ranch. It will not be a home for kids who have been in trouble most of their lives, Watson said.

"Children who have been hard-core adjudicated children will not be mixed in with children who just need a home," he said.

Watson's dream began while working in juvenile probation at Community Service Inc. in Faulkner County and attending the University of Central Arkansas. He said he realized the children "weren't bad, they just needed a chance. In a positive, Christian environment, they would have different outcomes."

He followed his dream to Gadsden, Ala., where he and his wife were trained as house parents at one of the premiere children's homes in the country, he said. After a year and a half, they returned to Arkansas, built a board of directors and secured nonprofit status for Soaring Wings Ranch.

Watson said he and his wife relied on the power of prayer for the financial challenges ahead. They committed to being debt-free, he said. As a private organization, the ranch will operate solely on donations from its supporters.

From the beginning, people who believe in the ranch have been generous with donations of money, labor and materials.

Supporters raised \$430,000 for the land, which, in itself, was miraculous, Watson said. A major donor sent a check by overnight delivery for the balance the day before the final payment was due. The balance was more than \$15,000, Watson said.

Since then, Watson has visited with several people who caught a glimpse of his vision and wanted to help. The total amount of donations to date is \$1.7 million. The clearing of the dense forest land was done by donated labor. The ranch now has two miles of gravel road, water and power, all of which were donated. Other donors have agreed to build the first boys' home, the first girls' home and a food and clothing center.

Beverly Strain Eads of New Port Richey, Fla., donated the boys' home in memory of her late husband, Del Strain. Eads said she owns a

cattle ranch north of Greenbrier and had hoped to start a youth home on her property.

"It made more financial sense to join him than do another one where he was already committed to build one. When my husband and I came up to Arkansas to start planning this, we found a lot of doors closed. When the door's closed, that's a sure sign to me I need to do something else.

"God works in mysterious ways, and when you get my age, you'd better start listening to him. I knew the Lord was in it, because there were too many prayers that were answered. Every single one of (Watson's) needs were met. That doesn't happen by accident."

She said one reason she wanted to fund the boys' home was because the girls' home was already funded, and it would save on construction costs to build the houses simultaneously. Also, she said, if the ranch opened with a girls' home and no boys' home, there was a chance that siblings might be separated.

"It is a rare privilege to be able to make a difference in the lives of children who have no other option," she added.

It has been about five years since Watson began to dream of the Soaring Wings Ranch. He is now hopeful that it will open by the end of this year.

When the ranch opens, it will have a home for eight boys and a home for eight girls. When it is complete, it will include five girls' homes and five boys' homes, a fishing pond, a horse stable, a tennis court, sports fields, a swimming pool, a learning center and a chapel. It will be able to house up to 16 children when it opens and up to 80 when it is complete. As executive director, Watson and his wife will also live on the ranch.

The cost of running the ranch will be \$2,000 per child per month, Watson said. He and the board are working on building up their donor base. To donate to Soaring Wings Ranch, call 329-8889 or visit [www.soaringwingsranch.com](http://www.soaringwingsranch.com). Donations may be mailed to P.O. Box 1670, Conway, Ark. 72033.

Members of the board are Chairman Matt Jones, Vice Chairman Marshall McKissack, Treasurer Jason Fowler, Secretary Jason Pederson and board members Ann Bynum, Jenifer Kendrick, Casey Jones and Dr. Jay Flaming.

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