

Make-A-Wish

A Foundation of Dreams Coming True for San Diego Kids

Louise Julig

How many times have you wished on a star? Did you wish for something practical, or for a creature comfort that you almost didn't want to admit that you wanted? Maybe you wished for something so wild and far out that you didn't even dare hope it would come true.

What if you knew for certain that your wish would be granted – if you could wish to go anywhere, be anything, meet anyone, or have anything you wanted, what would you wish for?

Within the past year, an Encinitas boy wished to see the ancient Mayan pyramids, a Carlsbad teen wished for her own horse, and a Bonita teenager wished to meet the Pope.

But these kids weren't just wishing on a star. They have the San Diego Make-A-Wish Foundation to turn their wishes into reality.

The foundation's mission is to make wishes like these come true for children facing life-threatening illnesses – to give them hope and strength while they're going through a tough time, and to provide a break from the everyday realities of doctors, hospitals and treatments.

As Delaney Fador, mother of "Wish Kid" Nalu says, "Make-A-Wish helps families and their kids smile when maybe they haven't smiled in a very

long time."

Make-A-Wish started 25 years ago and the San Diego chapter has been around for 22 of those years. In that time, the chapter has granted more than 1,700 wishes, in recent years averaging well over 100 annually.

Once a child is referred, typically by a family member,

wish experience. Often when a child is sick, parents are so focused on that child that other siblings may feel left out. The wish experience is meant to be something memorable for the whole family that gives them something positive to focus on instead of the stress and worry of illness.

Contrary to perception, wishes granted by the foundation are not intended as last wishes for dying kids. The process is meant to be life-affirming as well as bring hope and joy to kids and their families.

As Rachel Gershwin, director of marketing and development for the San Diego Make-A-Wish Foundation put it, "What we're all about is just being able to bring a really cool experience to these kids."

Here are the stories of three San Diego kids at different points in their Make-A-Wish journey.

A Mayan Adventure

Nalu Moepono is a bright, inquisitive second-grader at Capri Elementary in Encinitas who loves collecting fossils and learning about other cultures. He's also had more life experience in his seven

years than most people even many times his age. Nalu spent a year in the hospital when he was 2, battling a rare form of pediatric stomach cancer.

After a year of chemotherapy and radiation, he was ready to leave the hospital and able to celebrate his third



Nalu Moepono

doctor or social worker, Make-A-Wish's trained Wish Granters work directly with the children to find a wish that's special just for them.

Whenever possible, Make-A-Wish likes to involve the whole family in the

birthday at home. During that time, a parent liaison from the hospital recommended Make-A-Wish.

Fador says she can't recall if she had heard about the foundation earlier: "Maybe they had approached me during the time when we were living in the hospital, but it was like, 'Are you kidding? Maybe I'll call you later.' Living in the hospital, you're overwhelmed 200 percent."

Once Nalu was out of the woods and the family had a chance to breathe, they had a meeting with a team of Wish Granters or "fairy godmothers," as Nalu and his mother call them. Right away, Nalu said he wanted to visit the Mayan pyramids, which he became interested in from a Montessori preschool teacher who exposed him to geography, the ancient past and different cultures.

They weren't packing their bags right away, however. The Wish Granters followed up every six months for a few years. "For one, they wanted him to be old enough for the trip, and two, to make sure that it really was his wish," Fador says. "Fortunately, he was healthy then, so we didn't feel there was a big rush."

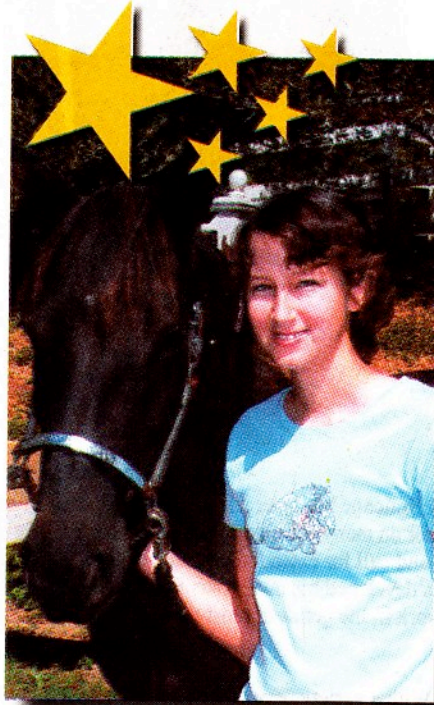
Says Nalu, "It was funny because every year they kept coming by and they said, 'Are you sure you want to do this? We can always just take you to Disneyland.'"

Nalu held steadfast to his original wish, however, and Make-A-Wish was convinced. El Camino Creek Elementary School adopted his wish and helped raise the money. Nalu and his mother were sent on an amazing trip to Belize and Guatemala in January 2005. They saw ancient pyramids and artifacts, went horseback riding with a native Mayan guide, had a snorkeling trip off the Caribbean coast, and generally had an unforgettable time.

"Make-A-Wish is like a dream come true because literally we did nothing," Fador says. "He told them what he wanted. They gave him exactly what he wanted and that's just the way they are. Right down to the details. They even tipped the limo driver to the airport."

"They arrange whatever fits the family. I told them he wants an authentic trip – he wants to see people that live there, so instead of a five-star hotel, we stayed in these cute cottages. And when we would go on an excursion, we didn't want to be lost in a group of adults. So they arranged private guides. What they did for Nalu couldn't have been more Nalu."

Horseback Dreams



Melanie Adams

Carlsbad teen Melanie Adams is a pretty typical 15-year-old. She likes hanging out with friends, spending time on her computer, using PlayStation and watching Animal Planet. But a year and a half ago, a diagnosis turned her life upside down; at one point she was given only a 20 to 30 percent chance of survival.

Melanie graduated from middle school in June 2004, and within a week was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes. "If you can imagine, we went from pictures at her graduation to hospitalization within a week," says her father, Bob Adams. She was put on an aggressive regimen of eight rounds of chemotherapy.

After five rounds, however, she became extremely ill with acute

respiratory distress syndrome and ended up in the ICU on life support for three weeks. Her chances of survival weren't good. Fortunately, she pulled through and slowly began recovering.

About this time, a social worker from the hospital told the family that Melanie was eligible for Make-A-Wish. Melanie's father remembers talking with her about the upcoming meeting with the Wish Granters:

"I said, 'The Make-A-Wish people are going to come around and speak to you and you have to decide what you would like that you've always wanted in the world.' When they asked her what she would like, we were kind of shocked that she asked for a horse.

"We would have been quite happy if she had said an Alaskan cruise or a trip to Disneyland or what have you, but she chose a horse and that was her first wish and she stuck with that the whole way through."

As with any wish, the foundation wanted to make sure it was going to be a good fit for her. And even though Melanie had always liked horses and had done a little riding, she did have a few reservations. "I was kind of uncertain," she says. "I was thinking, 'Will I actually bond with a horse?' because I hadn't been around them very much."

Wish coordinator Diane Johnson recommended the therapeutic riding program at the Helen Woodward Center, as Melanie had some nerve damage on her left side and was undergoing rehab. The 10-week program did help with her rehabilitation and solidified in Melanie's mind that a horse was definitely what she wanted.

After several months of checking out ranches, Melanie and her family picked the Mega Arte Riding Academy. The foundation granted her wish by giving her a half lease of a horse named Jasmine and riding lessons twice a week for two years. She had her first lesson in July.

As Melanie's mother, Tina Adams, tells it, "She absolutely loves it. She is learning to groom and lunge the horse, and she's learning about horsemanship. She really enjoys the whole horse ownership part of it. It really has been therapeutic and a benefit to her recovery."

Courtesy of Mega Arte Riding Academy

Mega Arte has other animals in a petting zoo at the ranch that Melanie's younger sister Ashley enjoys visiting. Their mom says she has even started taking some of the horses out and walking them with Melanie, "So we all really enjoy getting involved."

Melanie still needs a lot of monitoring, and she missed a year of school. So she started as a freshman this year at Carlsbad High, but as her father says, "This time last year, she was in the ICU, so we've come a long way."

A Vatican Visit

Andra Antwan, 15, is a sophomore at Academy of Our Lady of Peace in San Diego and the middle child of five girls. She and her family – mother Faiza, father Michael and sisters Angela, Agnes, Annabel and Annmarie – live in Bonita and attend St. Peter's Catholic Church in El Cajon.

Andra was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma early this year and underwent chemotherapy treatment from February through June, followed by two months of radiation.

A social worker at the hospital told Andra about Make-A-Wish early in her treatment, but she wasn't interested right away. Toward the end of her treatment she reconsidered, and decided to make her wish.

Originally planning a resort trip in the Bahamas, Andra saw on the Make-A-Wish Web site a story about a boy who got to meet the Pope, and decided that was what she wanted to do.

Asked why she wanted this to be her wish, Andra says, "My family is very religious and he is the highest authority in the Catholic Church. He is such a great role model for us and I thought it would be really interesting to do. And also it's not something that you can really do by yourself."

The Vatican has its own timetable, and procedures must be followed, so Andra and her family are now in waiting mode until they get the go-ahead. "The Vatican wanted to know why I wanted to meet the Pope, and also there's a bunch of other kids that want to meet him, so it depends on when I'm next in line and when he will be available," she says.

In addition to meeting the Pope with her family and getting a papal blessing, Andra would like to see the body of St. Rita and more of Rome in what would be her first trip overseas. She's not hoping for any particular time to go, but "just as long as it happens, I'll be excited."

While she's waiting, she says the people from Make-A-Wish have been very helpful and friendly with lots of advice and have sent her things like a journal and tour book to help her plan for the trip.

Andra is finished with her treatments and says her family has become much closer while dealing with her illness. "We just cherish all the moments we have together," she says.

A Family Affair

The Make-A-Wish Foundation of San Diego reaches out to families of seriously ill kids, but its involvement doesn't end when the wish experience is over. Wish families are sent tickets to prime seats at events such as Padres and Chargers games, Disney on Ice and the Blue Angels.

They also are invited to events such as the recent Halloween party where approximately 300 Wish Kids from San Diego got a chance to meet and have fun. These events are great opportunities for families who are still struggling with an illness to meet kids that have come through the other side and recovered.

As Gershwin says, "Once someone comes into our organization, they are part of our Wish family, regardless of where they are in their wish process, whether they have completed their wish or are still thinking about what their wish will be or whatever. We really keep our Wish families part of our family."

Fador sums it up: "Make-A-Wish is so amazing that they can make..." and son Nalu finishes her thought with "... everybody's life happier."

To find out how you can help wishes come true, visit

www.makeawish-sd.org ❖

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