

The Wish of a Lifetime

Foundation gets creative making wishes come true for critically ill children

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In April, the opportunity arose for a young man, diagnosed with sarcoma of the liver, to have a wish fulfilled by an extraordinary group – the Greater Bay Area Make-A-Wish Foundation.

The 18-year-old Chris (last name omitted for privacy) already had a private pilot's license but because of his illness was unable to fly himself. As his wish, he wanted to fly cross-country in the jump seat in the cockpit of a private jet.

Through the generosity of a local law firm, his wish was realized with an extraordinary cross-country trip ending in San Francisco – where Mayor Gavin Newsom proclaimed “Christopher's Day in San Francisco.”

Make-A-Wish makes a huge difference in the lives of kids who have been diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses. “This doesn't necessarily mean a death sentence,” East Bay coordinator Jim

Etherington explained. “That is an image that most people think of when they hear the organization's name, sort of a last wish, but it's really not that at all.”

Chris' cancer diagnosis came in January 2007 and underwent chemotherapy treatments until October. “When I was first diagnosed, there was no doubt in my mind that I'd be here in a year,” he said. With a slight build and a winning smile, Chris is visibly self-confident but with a measure of humility.

Taking flight again

After his wish, Chris's story took an unexpected turn of events that led to an added bonus. On May 1, a B-17 Flying Fortress arrived at Buchanan Field, sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association. Having received an invitation for a 20-minute “Media Flight,” The Concordian publishers decided to secure permission for Chris to join them aboard the plane – one of only 14 Fortresses still flying.

Unaware of the plan, Chris, who works at Sterling Aviation at Buchanan Field, excitedly called Etherington to share the

news about seeing the aircraft.

“I work here to support my habit,” Chris said of his job at Sterling Aviation, a general aviation company.

He rents aircraft and has logged more than 190 flying hours, a large number considering that a first-year pilot normally accrues just 50. After earning his license at 17, he is now working toward an instructor permit with hopes to fly commercial planes in the near future.

Helping more than 30 kids

Etherington and his wife are well into their ninth year as East Bay coordinators for Make-A-Wish. “When my wife Jane and I first considered volunteering for Make-A-Wish, I didn't want to work with dying kids. I had an 8- and a 10-year-old at home,” he said.

“We've done over 30 wishes,” Etherington added. “We've only lost one child before getting his wish.”

Etherington fell silent, the raw emotions visibly overpowering. “Michael,” he said, choking on the name.

Michael had wanted to visit the cast of “Star Trek: The Next Generation” while the popular science fiction show was filming in the '90s. All set to go, Michael fell seriously ill and was confined to the hospital.

With time running out, Etherington and Make-A-Wish scrambled to see what could be done and secured commitments for the major stars of the show to fly up to fulfill Michael's wish in the



CHRIS BOARDS a B-17 for a Bay Area flight.

hospital. While they were enroute, Michael died.

Powerful emotions

For Etherington, it was a devastating blow. Even after all the time and successes that have passed, it still grips him with emotions to the point of being almost unable to talk. Although still involved with Make-A-Wish fund-raisers, Etherington was unable to be a wish granter for almost six months after Michael's death.

“Jane and I had talked to volunteers who had lost kids,” he said. “They told us what it was like but until you are there ... you can't know.”

He compliments his wife's ability to talk about it. “She hates public speaking,” he said, “but she can get up and finish the story when I can't.”

Their own children have now grown. His oldest son, 23, “kisses me on top of my forehead,” Etherington said of their closeness. Recently his older son asked how he manages to continue with Make-A-Wish, having watched his parents caught up in the bittersweet emotions that often pervade all aspects of their giving.

“A lot of times, I get emotional,” Etherington explained. “It's happy. I get overwhelmed when things go well or when a wish has had this huge impact on the child. And



JIM ETHERINGTON, Bay Area Coordinator for Make-A-Wish Foundation, helped facilitate Chris's flight

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See **Wish**, page 16