

Thanks to blimp, teens in chemo fly high



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Monica Kissell is hugged by her son DJ, 15, after his ride in the MetLife blimp at Toledo Executive Airport in Millbury, Ohio. The cancer patient and his mom are from Bloomville, Ohio. For years, 15-year-old DJ Kissell had wanted to dye his hair blue, but his mother never allowed it.

After he began chemotherapy for leukemia and his hair started falling out, she willingly gave in.

"He looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, 'Now can I dye it blue?' " Monica Kissell said.

DJ, who is from Bloomville, Ohio, and now sports bright orange hair, was one of three teenage oncology patients who had the chance to ride in a blimp Saturday morning over downtown Toledo.

The blimp left from Toledo Executive Airport and took individual trips for each patient and a family member, cruising over the Maumee River, patients' houses, and Mercy Children's Hospital, where they receive treatments.

For DJ, flying over the hospital more than 1,000 feet up was relaxing.

"You don't have to go in, you just go over. It was awesome," he said.

Charlie Smith, chief pilot of the MetLife Snoopy Two blimp that took the patients up, said the blimp is in Toledo for the U.S. Senior Open Golf Tournament.

The MetLife blimp program provides aerial coverage of more than 80 events each year, including NFL games and golf tournaments, as the official aerial provider for the PGA Tour.

Although the blimp is mainly used for sporting events, MetLife also works with the nonprofit organization Believe in Tomorrow to provide rides to young cancer patients in the cities visited, Mr. Smith said.



"Pretty much every city we go to we give rides through the BIT program," he said.

The BIT National Children's Foundation is headquartered in Baltimore and provides housing services to families with critically ill children.

The organization's Hands On Adventures program partners with

charities to coordinate adventure opportunities for critically ill children.

Toledoan Adam Najjar, 15, also got the chance to go up in the blimp, where he was able to see the Mud Hens stadium, downtown Toledo, and his house from a bird's-eye view.

"It was a fun experience," he said.

Adam learned in November that he has leukemia, and is still undergoing treatment.

Thirteen-year-old Amilia Perez of Perrysburg boarded the blimp with her mother, Judith Hernandez, right after DJ got off.

Amilia and DJ quickly became close friends while they were receiving chemotherapy treatments at Mercy.

Amilia was given a diagnosis of leukemia in January, DJ in February.

"I try to make him happy, and he tries to make me happy," Amilia said. She recently finished her treatment -- she finds out on Aug. 15 if she's in remission.

Ms. Kissell said her son still has three years of treatment ahead of him. Amilia will continue to visit DJ in the hospital to keep him company.

Family members said some days are tougher than others.

"Chemo is the hardest part," Amilia said. "It gives me mouth sores, makes me throw up, and peels the inside of your mouth, [which] makes it hard to eat."

DJ Kissell, inside at left, gets the ride of his life in the MetLife blimp. For DJ, who also has Type 1 diabetes, the cancer was discovered when he was hospitalized for a sinus infection that wouldn't improve despite a week of antibiotics.

Within the first few months of chemotherapy, her hair started coming out, along with her eyebrows and eyelashes, Ms. Hernandez said.

Both Amilia and DJ learned they had the disease in unexpected ways. Amilia hurt her knee, had back strain, and was having trouble breathing, her father, Rudy Perez, said. Doctors sent her for a biopsy after a chest X-ray showed excess fluid in her lungs.

The results revealed something shocking: Amilia had cancer.

Mr. Perez said faith is what gets him through each day.

"I put my faith in God, knowing that everything will be OK," he said.

For DJ, who also has Type 1 diabetes, the cancer was discovered when he was hospitalized for a sinus infection that wouldn't improve, despite a week of antibiotics.

"He didn't have any symptoms at all," Ms. Kissell said.

Chemotherapy hasn't stopped the teenagers from doing things they love -- for Amilia, that includes dancing and listening to her favorite music.

DJ dyes his hair every other week and looks forward to changing the colors. So far he has dyed it blue, black, purple, pink, black with pink polka dots, platinum, and green.

Although his hair is slowly thinning, DJ will keep experimenting as long as he can. The next shade on the agenda? Electric blue.

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