

## Riding high after hitting lows

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Amelia Perez rests her head on the shoulder of her mother Judith Hernandez as she waits for a ride on the MetLife Snoopy 2 blimp. Perez, a Perrysburg teen, was diagnosed with leukemia in January of this year and was one of four teens chosen by the Believe in Tomorrow Children's Foundation to fly in the blimp Saturday. (Photos: Enoch Wu/Sentinel Tribune)

MILLBURY - Hours before she was scheduled to ascend into the sky in a blimp, Perrysburg's Amilia Perez tried to equate the unknown experience to something she'd already done.

"I've been in a roller coaster," said Amilia, 13, a self-described huge fan of amusement parks, "but I haven't gone 1,000 feet in the air!"

On Saturday morning she found out for herself that riding in a blimp feels a lot more like water-borne transportation than anything else.

"It was like a boat ride; you kept rocking."

The Snoopy II blimp set off from the Toledo Executive Airport (formerly Metcalf Field). The ride came courtesy of MetLife, in cooperation with a program called Believe In Tomorrow's Hands On Adventures that was formed a decade ago with the mission of giving critically ill children around the country a never-to-be-forgotten experience.

In Amilia's case, they succeeded in that goal.

"Oh my gosh, it was so much fun. It was awesome!" she

was still gushing a day later. "It was a one-in-a-lifetime chance."

"When you first went in the air you couldn't believe you were off the ground." At first she felt a little bit scared, "then all the butterflies went away" and the rest of the 40-minute ride was a delight.

Also a passenger on the blimp with Amilia was her mother, Judith Hernandez, who admitted to feeling symptoms of seasickness. "Me and the pilot were up front. My mom was in the back."

The aerial treat was a wonderful change of pace for Amilia, who was diagnosed with stage four leukemia in January and has spent the months since on a different kind of roller coaster. The initial frantic search for the correct diagnosis as a strange string of symptoms manifested themselves, has been followed by six months of aggressive treatment including chemotherapy at Mercy Children's Hospital in Toledo.



Monica Kissell of Bloomville, Ohio, hugs Perrysburg teen Amelia Perez before Perez takes a trip over Toledo in the MetLife Snoopy 2 blimp as fellow friend DJ Kissell (left) 15, chief pilot Charlie Smith and Snoopy 2 crew members look on.

been able to fly on one of two Snoopy blimps somewhere around the country almost every weekend throughout the year. Saturday is the first time that Mercy Children's Hospital patients have participated in a BIT adventure.

Both of Amilia's parents are grateful that someone wanted to do something so special for their daughter, a typical teen who hasn't been able to indulge in her favorite pastimes of swimming, dancing and hip hop music, much less make a trip to Cedar Point this summer.



Perrysburg teen Amelia Perez (left) talks with Charlie Smith, the chief pilot of the MetLife Snoopy 2 blimp, as mother Judith Hernandez listens in.

During her in- and out-patient hospitalization, Amilia has become good friends with a boy who knows all too well what she's been doing through.

DJ Kissell, a 15-year-old from Bloomville, has also been in treatment for leukemia, and the initial plan was for DJ and Amilia to go up into the blimp together.

Instead, they each got back-to-back rides.

Afterward, the two teens and their moms went to lunch together at China City Buffet in Perrysburg so they could compare notes on the aerial adventure.

A third teenage cancer patient, Adam Najjar of Toledo, was also given a ride in the blimp, which passed over the children's own homes and downtown landmarks like the Mud Hens stadium.

The Baltimore-based Believe In Tomorrow Children's Foundation (BIT) and MetLife formed their charitable partnership just last year, so only recently have children

"I wanted to stay in bed all day," she said of the worst times over the last several months.

Her dad, Rudy Perez, remembers "it all started out with her just bumping her knee, going up steps." The pain got worse, instead of going away, so her mother took her to the emergency room. "They put her on crutches," then a brace, and told Amilia she had something that people her age sometimes get.

"Then her back started hurting real bad and they said it was a lumbar strain" after X-ray showed nothing.

That was followed by a diagnosis of a urinary tract infection and a further trip to the ER for a polyp, which led the doctor to recommend an appointment with a gynecologist.

But it was their own family doctor who noticed she was looking "a little bloated in the mid-section" and sent them to the hospital.

"That's when we found out she had fluid in the lungs," said Perez. "They wanted to drain it, but it filled right up again."

By then it was obvious that something serious was going on and Amilia was taken by ambulance to St. Vincent. "She had tumors in her abdomen area.

"The doctors started treatment right away; they didn't waste any time." The family was told that Amilia would have been dead within another two weeks.

August is going to be a big month for her. She turns 14.

She also finds out whether the chemo she's been receiving once a month, "usually for five days at a time," has put her in remission. "She just had her last treatment of chemo a few days ago and they're going to do a CT scan," said her dad.

If all goes well, she hopes to start classes at Perrysburg Junior High School.

"I missed the second semester" of the last school year, Amilia explained. "In the hospital I did my homework on the computer."

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