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12 YEARS LATER CHILD CANCER SURVIVOR CHAPERONES CHARITY TRIP OF A LIFETIME FOR OTHER DESERVING KIDS

By Kristan Myers
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Edmonton, AB – Natasia Dizak was just two years old when her parents heard the words no parent ever wants to hear - “Your child has cancer.” According to the Canadian Cancer Society, on average 565 Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer every day. Childhood cancer accounts for less than 1% of all new cases of cancer in Canada.

The cancer journey would prove to be a revolving door of chemotherapy treatments, hospital stays and endless doctor’s appointments. Weeks, months and even years passed as David and Carol Dizak wondered if they would ever see the end in sight. Would the “end” give them the outcome they wished, hoped and prayed for? They put on a brave face for their only child, but their hearts were breaking as they watched her take chemotherapy treatments, often lying in a bed next to adults receiving treatment at the Cross Cancer Institute.

“The resilience of a child's will is remarkable,” Carol reflects on the horror of the treatment protocols and what they involved. “We had no control over the disease or the repeated suffering Natasia was going through. But we watched her give strength to those much older battling the same disease, and we endured.”

Natasia remembers the pain from cancer treatments and often having to be separated from her parents. “My mom and dad kept saying that they wished they could take the cancer away from me.” Natasia explains. “But they couldn’t and that was really hard on my family.”

It was during one of the darkest periods of treatment that a social worker from the pediatric oncology team approached the Dizak's about giving Natasia the opportunity of a lifetime. Would they like to send her to Disneyland for one day so she could meet Mickey and Minnie Mouse? Their first thought was, "How is this even possible." And just like that the family was introduced to Dreams Take Flight.

Dreams Take Flight is a national non-profit organization that takes deserving children to a major theme park on a one day trip out of the country. Air Canada, the principal sponsor, donates the aircraft for the day, while the pilots, flight crew and countless other airline, airport and community volunteers contribute to pull together the amazing annual event. The charity is 100% volunteer run and funds raised are used to pay for expenses such as fuel for the aircraft, park admission, spending money, souvenirs and special clothing for each child. It's a momentous task that takes nearly 365 days to organize (including arranging a full medical team of volunteers to accompany children like Natasia), but the outcome is worth it.

"I remember being scared getting on the plane without my parents and I wouldn't eat anything." Natasia recalls with a laugh. "But I felt very special and proud to wear my little white and pink runners that the volunteers gave me to wear on the trip. I received a whole set of clothing for that special day, but I kept those little runners as a souvenir. I also received a little Minnie Mouse doll which still sits on my bookshelf today and reminds me of the incredible experience."

Natasia Dizak is just one of more than 2500 children who have made the trip since the organization opened a chapter in Edmonton in 1992. This year marks the local charity's 25th anniversary of making dreams come true in the province and they've since expanded to include children as far north as Fort MacKay and even up into the Northwest Territories. With the non-profit organization celebrating their 25 years of achievement, they are doing it in the most magical way possible – they are inviting Natasia back to be an adult chaperone on this year's flight.

"My group was called Hercules and my team leader's name was Harry. I've always been excited to say I was a part of the "Harry Hercules" group." Natasia's memories are a little bittersweet as she recently learned that "Harry Hercules", whose real name is Harry Henke, passed away in 2013. Harry had been a dedicated volunteer with Dreams Take Flight since the chapter opened its doors in Edmonton 25 years ago. "I think it's really special that I get to carry the tradition on and share the legacy that Harry and other volunteers like him passed down to me. I'm really looking forward to making this year's trip the highlight of someone else's childhood."

Natasia says, "If there was anything good about having cancer, it was definitely getting to go on the trip with Dreams Take Flight. It gave me strength and joy when I needed it most." She is now a first-year student at McEwan University and has been cancer free for the past 12 years.

She is living proof that the trip may last one day but the memories last a lifetime.

For more information about Dreams Take Flight, to nominate a child or to make a donation, please visit www.yeg.dreamstakeflight.ca.

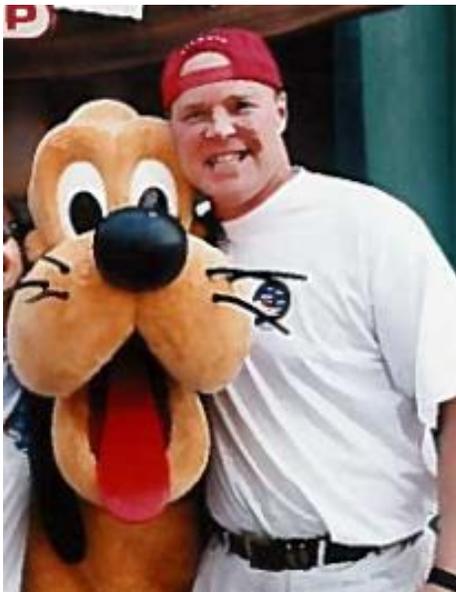
Photographs:



Natasia Dizak is just one of more than 2500 children from Alberta and the Northwest Territories who have made the trip with Dreams Take Flight since the organization opened a chapter in Edmonton in 1992.



Natasia's memorable childhood adventure to Disneyland is often still talked about today by her family. Carol and David Dizak are grateful to the local charity for giving their little girl a reprieve from battling cancer.



Harry Henke, pictured on the right side of Pluto, was a volunteer with Dreams Take Flight Edmonton since the chapter opened in Edmonton in 1992. Harry passed away in April 2013 after more than 21 years of service with the charity.

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Natasia Dizak, pictured here in May 2017 with her parents David and Carol Dizak, has now been cancer free for over 12 years. She is a first-year student at McEwan University.

About Dreams Take Flight

Dreams Take Flight took wing in 1989 when a group of Air Canada employees in Toronto organized a trip of 70 special needs children aboard a DC-9 aircraft to a major theme park in Florida. By 1997, the charity had expanded to service 8 chapters across Canada, including Edmonton.

Dreams Take Flight is a 100% volunteer powered charitable organization. With the aid of Air Canada and the Air Canada Foundation, other national and local sponsors along with local businesses and community members, money is fundraised throughout the year to pay for all the expenses associated with the annual flight. Although the aircraft is donated by Air Canada each year, money raised is used to pay for the numerous expenses associated with the flight such as fuel for the aircraft, park admission for the children and volunteer chaperones, spending money for each group, and souvenirs and special clothing for each child. 100% of funds raised go to the charity and donations are warmly welcomed. As a registered Canadian charity, all financial donations over \$20 are tax deductible.

For more information about Dreams Take Flight, please visit our [website](#).

About Air Canada

Air Canada is Canada's largest full service airline and the largest provider of scheduled passenger flights within Canada, between Canada and the U.S., and to every major international destination.

Since the birth of Dreams Take Flight, Air Canada has been the principal sponsor of the organization. Every year in each of the 8 chapter cities, Air Canada donates the use of one of their jets for 24 hours. In the case of Edmonton, the jet arrives in the early morning hours on the day of the event. The volunteer flight crew flies everyone to Anaheim, where the jet remains at the airport while the children visit a major theme park for the day. The jet does not go back into Air Canada's normal operations until after the volunteers have returned from their trip.

For more information about Air Canada, please visit their [website](#).

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