

300 Wishes Bring Hope to Sick Kids

By Matthew Brown — Associated Press Writer

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The nightmare of a cancer diagnosis at age 15 has brought Guy Hutton the wish of a lifetime. But Hutton is no Disney kid, eager to visit Mickey Mouse or Cinderella in sunny Florida like many other children with life-threatening illnesses.

What animates Hutton, from his vantage on a Montana ranch tucked just south of the Canadian border, is a new pickup. Make that an old one, a 1978 Ford. It cost his family \$800 and was recently refurbished for more than 10 times that amount as the 300th wish granted by the Montana Hope Project.

"Cancer sucked," said Hutton, who received the truck at a New Year's Eve event in Helena. "But this is making up for it."

Since its founding 25 years ago by members of the Montana Highway Patrol, the Montana Hope Project has sent 178 children to Disney World and Disneyland. Forty-six children asked for and got new computers. Two went on shopping sprees. Four went to Hawaii. Five wanted hot tubs.

And every once in a while a one-of-a-kind request comes along, like the little girl from Columbia Falls who wanted to see Amy Grant in concert. Another child from Belgrade who simply wanted a pug puppy. Guy Hutton and his truck.

Hutton, of Turner, population 100, was diagnosed with lymphoma in April, when a sharp pain led to discovery of a mass "as large of a man's fist" in his chest, said his mother, Linda.

He recalls disappointment on the day of his diagnosis because it meant he would miss a calf branding that week-end. Instead, he flew to Seattle to spend four-and-a-half months in a chemotherapy program at Children's Hospital, leaving him wistful for the open spaces back home.

"If you like the city that's fine. I'm a country boy and I'll stick to my gravel roads," he said. And as for his Ford: "I'm not a Disney person. Absolutely not. It was either this or the rodeo," he said.

Whatever a sick child's wish, the Montana Hope Project tries to deliver, said Richard Hader, a state trooper from Missoula and president of the organization. "We were



chuckling over the fact that it's an (\$800) pickup, but it's his pickup," Hader said.

The program is modeled after the Make-A-Wish foundation, founded in 1980 by law enforcement officers in Arizona. But as Make-A Wish mushroomed into an international organization that now grants a wish every 40 minutes — 172,000 and counting — the Montana program remained small, with 10 to 15 wishes a year.

Hader said that has given the organization flexibility to stay involved beyond the act of granting a wish. Its twice-a-year reunions — every winter at Fairmont Hot Springs

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Montana Trooper

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and summer at Glacier National Park — have become annual vacations for many families.

"All of a sudden all their worries are gone. There are other children that have the same problems and everyday struggles, and they feel normal for the weekend," Hader said.

For seven years Hader worked as one of the Hope Project's regional coordinators, tracking down families in need and tackling the logistics needed to meet the child's special request.

Cancer is the most common ailment, with cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy also common. Most wish recipients survive well past childhood, although many won't make it to 30 years old, Hader said.

He said that among the most heart-wrenching parts of the job is to watch the realization that dawns on some parents when they are first told their child is eligible for a wish.

"I've had families that didn't want to believe their children's illness," he said. "It was worse when we showed up and granted a wish and drove the point home to them."

For Leanne Beers of Missoula, such moments have come in pairs, after her daughter was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy and later her son with a heart condition.

The Hope Project has since sent the family on two week-long trips.

Jessica, now 10, took the tried and true route to Disney World two years ago. There she indulged her appetite for all things princess, through face-to-face meetings arranged with Cinderella, Snow White and the Little Mermaid, Ariel.

"We could have anything we wanted for breakfast," she said. "I had blueberries and ice cream. I liked it and I loved it and I liked it a lot."

Thomas, 8, opted for SeaWorld, where last May he got a chance to feed Shamu, the theme park's famous killer whale.

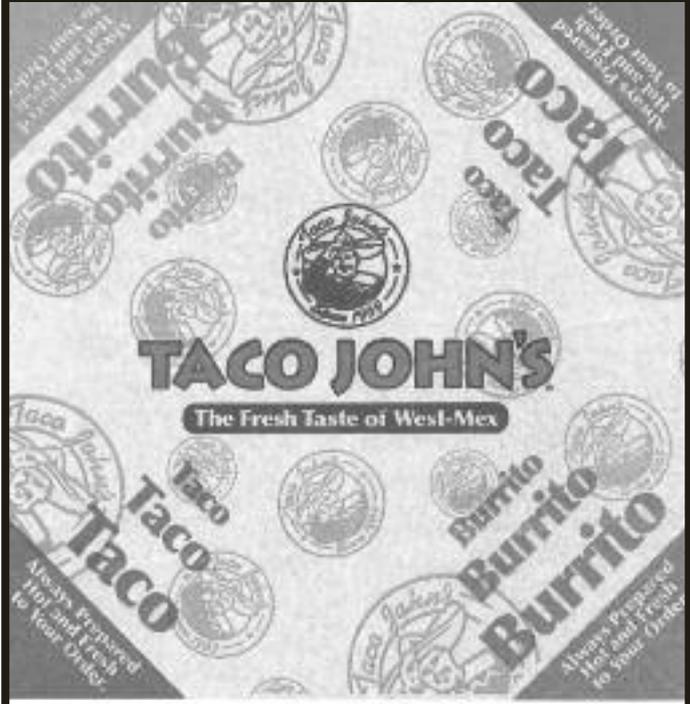
The irreplaceable nature of the trip was underscored this fall when Thomas suffered a massive heart attack and had to be airlifted to Seattle for medical treatment. Trooper Hader, who had developed a close bond with the child, flew to the city to visit the boy and his family at the hospital.

Leanne Beers said the visit epitomized the Montana Hope Project's commitment.

"There's no words to describe it," she said. "Richard and the entire Hope Project — they are there unconditionally." □

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