

Montana Trooper

# Troopers Bringing Hope, Joy to Montana Youngsters Since 1984

By Perry Backus of the Ravalli Republic  
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CORVALLIS — Levi Spencer's dream of boarding an airplane and watching a whale officially arrived, accompanied by cupcakes and a stuffed teddy bear.

The Corvallis first-grader's brothers, sisters and mom were there as well to savor the moment brought to the Pinesdale family by the Montana Hope Project.

Montana Highway Patrol Trooper Rocky Bailey serves as district representative for the Montana Hope Project. He presented the family with some spending money and a camera for their all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyworld.

"This family is exactly the type of circumstance the Montana Hope Project was created to serve," he said.

In 1984, a handful of Montana Highway Patrol troopers dug into their own pockets, borrowed a van and took a couple of kids with life-threatening illnesses to Glacier National Park.

Since then, the nonprofit begun by the Association of Montana Troopers has granted 355 wishes to families with children facing daunting medical challenges.

The Spencer family's three youngest boys, Levi and twins Aaron and Allen, have been diagnosed with the rare genetic disorder called Giant Axonal Neuropathy or GAN. The disease damages nerve pathways that carry signals from the brain to the muscles. Over time, it slowly causes its victims to lose control of their bodily functions.



Montana Highway Trooper Rocky Bailey presented the Spencer family with a check for spending money and a camera to record their all-expenses-paid trip to Disney World from the Montana Hope Project. The three youngest Spencer boys have been diagnosed with a rare neurological disease. PHOTO BY PERRY BACKUS OF THE RAVALLI REPUBLIC.

There are 28 known cases of the disease in the world.

Over the past year, the community has helped raise more than \$120,000 toward a \$450,000 matching grant from the Doris Buffet Sunshine Lady Foundation that will be used to pay for a clinical trial into a potential treatment for the disease.

Publicity from those fundraising efforts helped Bailey connect with the family and provide them with an application for the Montana Hope Project.

The family was offered two wishes from the foundation.

Last October, a hot tub was delivered to their home for use in the warm-water therapy that helps ease the boys' pain. And now, Spencer's wish of boarding a plane and seeing a different part of the world will come true.

"I'm glad this day has finally come for you guys," Bailey said with a big smile, as he stood at the head of Spencer's first-grade class. "It's been great to read about all this community support that you've received."

Spencer's teacher was wearing a large smile, too.

"It's an exciting time for all of us," said Krista Votaw. "I get choked up every time I think about these boys. They bring such joy to all of us. This is what we all want to see for them."

Over by the door, the boys' grandmother watched the event unfold. Lynette Spencer, of Nephi, Utah, sometimes has to pinch herself to believe the outpouring her family has received from the Bitterroot Valley and beyond.

"I've been overwhelmed with it," Spencer said. "I never would have expected that so many people would be willing to step forward to help these little boys. We are all so appreciative."

The Montana Hope Project grants between 15 and 30 wishes a year to families with children from ages 2 to 18, Bailey said. Beyond having wishes granted, the families are invited to two retreats held in summer and winter.

"They become part of the Montana Hope Project family," Bailey said. "When they come together each year, they bond with people who share some of the same struggles that they face on a daily basis. It's just a great program."

For more information on the Montana Hope Project and how you can donate, please go to: [www.montanahope.org](http://www.montanahope.org).