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Features

Local 'Wish Kids' enjoy the ride of their lives

BY NEEL KELLER | SENTINEL STAFF

Area participants in eastern North Carolina's Make-A-Wish program took some friends and relatives along for an exciting airborne outing on a recent Saturday at the Dare County Regional Airport.



A smiling group of ten children got to join pilot Rick Rahim for a free helicopter ride on a recent Saturday morning at the Dare County Regional Airport in a special event arranged by the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Eastern North Carolina. Pictured, from left, are Erica, Rachel, Grayson, Hunter, Kevin, Rahim, Nathan, Bethany, Breanna, Katie and Aubrey. (Make-A-Wish Foundation)

A total of 10 kids split up into two groups for helicopter rides with pilot Rick Rahim of Great Falls, Va. The kids left bursting with smiles and talk of becoming pilots one day. Rahim said he was "well paid," despite the fact that the two helicopter rides were free of charge.

Rose McHale, a volunteer wish-granter for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Eastern N.C. who lives in Kitty Hawk, said, "Once again I got back far more than I gave." McHale arranged the helicopter rides with Rahim.

Rahim is an entrepreneur best known for his chain of laser tag centers, including Gearworks Laser Tag and Fun Center in Nags Head. He's also an accomplished helicopter and plane pilot who flies his own Bell 206 Long Ranger turbine helicopter and Cessna Citation II twin engine jet.

The father of four has been flying since 2002. He has flown volunteer missions for Virginia Airborne Search and Rescue, Project Lifesaver and the Chesapeake Sheriff's Office. But what Rahim likes to talk about the most is his work for the past eight years with the Young Eagles program.

Sponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association based in Oshkosh, WI, the Young Eagles was started in 1992 with the goal of giving one

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million children an airplane ride by Dec. 17, 2003 - the centennial of the Wright brothers' first flight. Nearly one and a half million children from over 90 countries have now participated in the program, which is intended to educate and create an interest among young people in aviation.

Rahim, who has now flown more than 1,100 kids, has been honored for the past four years as the No. 1 Young Eagles pilot by the Virginia Department of Aviation. But the rewards, Rahim said, go far beyond this recognition.

"It's something I just always wanted to do," said Rahim. "As a seven-year-old kid, I made my own 'bucket list' - and right at the top was flying helicopters. When the day came that I had the time and the money to do it, I decided to share this dream with other kids.

"It's exciting for any kid to go for a helicopter ride. But I especially love helping kids with challenges - kids from disadvantaged backgrounds or kids who face medical challenges. I want to help motivate them to dream big - to believe they can literally do anything they set their minds to."

McHale said the recent helicopter event began with a phone call she made last summer to Gearworks Laser Tag to inquire about setting up some free laser tag tickets for some of her wish kids.

"I was told to call the corporate number and talk to Rick Rahim," said McHale. "I thought, 'Oh great! I'll never hear back from him!' But then he called me right back and set up the free laser tag."

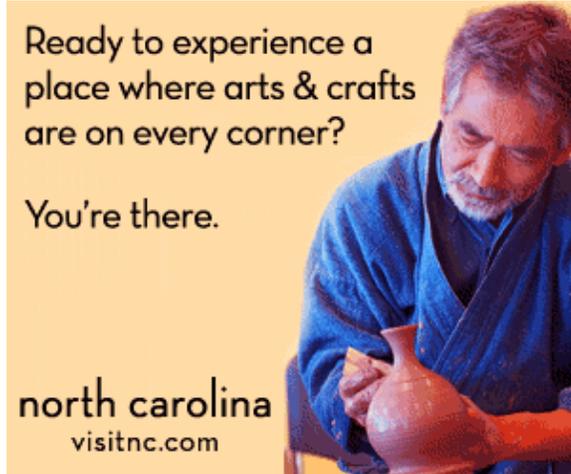
Later, a curious McHale was exploring Rahim's websites and came across one called "freehelicopterrides.com." Her excitement mounting, McHale called Rahim and found out he was flying down to spend the weekend at his beach house in Nags Head.

"Can you give some of our wish kids a helicopter ride?" asked McHale.

Rahim said he would be glad to and that the wish kids could bring along some friends.

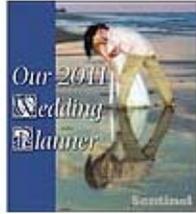
After a long day of making telephone calls and getting releases signed, McHale met three of her local wish kids - Hunter from Manteo, Nathan from Kill Devil Hills and Rachel from Camden - along with their families and friends at the Dare Regional Airport Saturday morning at 10 a.m.

Rahim greeted the group and gave a brief talk about how helicopters fly, how the controls are operated and safety guidelines. Following a question



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and answer period and confirmation that all the kids were "not too scared to try out flying in a helicopter," Rahim took off with the first group of five. Wish kids Hunter and Nathan had the added thrill of each getting to sit up front in the co-pilot's seat for some hands-on flight instruction.

The flights provided breathtaking aerial views of Roanoke Island, Jockey's Ridge, the offshore dredges pumping sand for the Nags Head beach nourishment project and Hatteras Island as far south as the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse.

"It was my first time in a helicopter," said Nathan, 13. "Sitting up front was great, because you could see out of the bottom of the front end of the helicopter and see the ground below you as you took off. It was a little noisy, but when you had your head gear on it wasn't that loud. You could also hear the air traffic on the radio. Hatteras Island was really green."

"This was a great experience for all the kids," said Nathan's mother, Martha. "My niece was visiting from South Carolina and she got to go along. She was making a list of things she got to do on the Outer Banks. She said, 'This is definitely the big one!'"

"It was my first time in a helicopter, and it was very cool," said Rachel, 17. "I wasn't scared at all!"

"It was awesome," added Rachel's mother, Lisa. "When Rose called and told us about it, we said, 'No way! Really? No way!' Rachel's Dad pouted all the way to the airport because he was in the Navy for 12 years and never flew in a helicopter. Rachel's little brother and sister got to go, too. They've been telling all their friends about it, but they wouldn't believe them until we showed them the pictures and the video."

On Thursday, Aug. 11, Rachel had her Wish Delivery Party at McHale's home with friends and family, learning the details of her upcoming week-long trip to Jamaica. The agenda of activities will include scuba diving, a dolphin swim and spending some serious time on the beach at the Beaches Boscobel Resort.

Hunter, 8, said, "Mr. Rahim is a really good pilot, because he teaches you how to drive a helicopter before you ever even take a class. This was the best day of my life!"

Hunter's mother, Holly, recalled that her son was deeply saddened by the death of Steve "the Dream" Thomas, who portrayed Pamlico Jack the Pirate at Hunter's Wish Delivery Party. "He slept with Steve's picture next to his bed for a long time. He was so shaken up. Life is so short, and Hunter loved Pamlico Jack."

Holly said her first instinct as an "overprotective parent" was to say "No No No!" to the helicopter ride idea. "But then we thought about it. We knew God took us through the whole cancer thing with Hunter - and we knew He could certainly get us through a helicopter ride. Now I'm so glad we said yes. When Hunter got off the helicopter, he came running towards me as fast as he could run. And the joy on his face was unbelievable!"

"I've yet to see a kid get off the helicopter not smiling," Rahim said. "We heard a lot of statements like, 'Aw, do we have to go back?'"

The first Make-A-Wish Foundation chapter was founded in Arizona in 1980 when a seven-year-old boy diagnosed with leukemia asked to be a Phoenix police officer for a day. The boy received his own uniform, helmet and badge and went for a ride in a police helicopter.

The Make-A-Wish Foundation of Eastern N.C. was started in 1986 and granted its first wish to an eight-year-old boy who wanted to meet two of his favorite wrestling stars. The foundation arranged for a special match at a nearby arena and one wrestler's visit to the boy's room at Duke University Hospital.

The foundation's mission is to grant wishes to children from two-and-a-half to 18 years old who have life-threatening medical conditions. Seeking to infuse the young patients with a healthy dose of joy and hope, the organization's motto is, "While doctors provide the medicine, we provide the magic."

"This was fantastic," said Holly. "Mr. Rahim was so generous in taking up the kids. And Hunter even got to bring along a friend."

"Rose stays in contact with all the wish kids and is always looking for something to do with them," added Martha. "A while back she got tickets to the Ringling Brothers. And now this - riding in the MacDaddy of helicopters - this tops them all."

"It's all about the kids," said McHale. "The long-term relationships I have started with them and their families are unbelievably rewarding."

"When you see the kids' smiles, that more than makes it all worthwhile," added Rahim. "That beats any amount of money."

For more information on the Make-A-Wish Foundation, call McHale at 255-0043.

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