

## A Make-A-Wish dream come true; Evanston girl with cancer takes trip to San Diego

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EVANSTON — According to Disney's "Cinderella," a dream is a wish your heart makes. Last week, Shayleen Stahley lived a dream with her family and best friend, as they traveled to San Diego, California, for a Make-A-Wish trip.

Like every 12-year-old girl, Shayleen has dreams. Those dreams took a hit on Aug. 19, 2014, when she was diagnosed with childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

"It seemed like we were at the hospital every day," Shayleen said.

Shayleen's mother, Jennifer Stahley, said they had to travel to Primary Children's Hospital once a week at the beginning of the treatment process. Now, they only have to drive to Salt Lake City once a month to see the doctor and receive treatments.

"She is halfway done with her treatments and [she's] doing great," Jennifer Stahley said. "She'll be done next year sometime."

Shayleen said the hardest thing has been not being in school and not getting to spend time with friends. Treatments have caused her immune system to weaken, so she can't be around large groups of people. If friends or family are sick, it puts her at greater risk of illness and can be potentially life-threatening.

"It's hard not getting to see my friends," Shayleen said, "but I got to visit them and started going to school half-days in second semester."

All the travel, treatments, and isolation have taken their toll on the entire family. Ralph Stahley, Shayleen's father, had to take several days off work, which added to the stress of caring for his family.

"This has caused me to put my personal priorities in place," he said. "I'm just trying to take care of things and give 110 percent to keep it all going."

Keep it all going is exactly what the family has done with the help of Ralph's father, Jennifer's parents and many people who have supported Shayleen and the family throughout this battle.

"Without them, we couldn't have gotten through this," Jennifer Stahley said.



*Shayleen Stahley and her "BFF," Jordyn Moyes, enjoy some fun in the sun on a recent trip to San Diego. Shayleen was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in 2014, and the trip was made possible by Make-A-Wish Wyoming. (COURTESY PHOTO)*

During this process, Shayleen's doctor submitted her name to the Make-A-Wish organization, which grants the wishes of children diagnosed with life-threatening medical conditions.

There is a four-step process that helps the organization determine whom it grants wishes to:

Step One – receiving a referral from a medical professional, parent or other children. Kids must be at least two and half years old and under 18.

Step Two – the child must be diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition.

Step Three – a wish team is sent to meet the child and learn the child's one true wish or help them awaken their dream.

Step Four – wish granters create a personalized experience to match the kid's wish.

According to the Make-A-Wish website, on average, one wish is granted every 38 minutes in the United States and its territories. In Wyoming, the organization grants approximately 30 wishes a year.

Shayleen's wish was to go to San Diego. Over the years her grandfather, who was stationed there, shared stories about the zoo and how amazing it was to visit. Make-A-Wish made it happen.

Since Shayleen is an only child, she was permitted to bring a friend on the trip, along with her parents. Jordyn Moyes, her "BFF," as she put it, went on the adventure with the family.

"I was there from day one since she had cancer and was really close. I've always been there and didn't really leave her side," Jordyn said. "I was excited to go. It was a really fun trip."

Not only was it a wish, but it was also a trip of firsts for the two girls. It was the first time they flew in an airplane; the first time to see the ocean and swim in it; and Shayleen's first time on a rollercoaster.

"We got to swim a lot and see a lot of things," Shayleen said. "For me, the highlight was the lion, tiger and bear sanctuary. It was our first stop and Make-A-Wish gave us a shirt and sweater from there. We also got to be with some of the animals."

The refuge helps rescue lions, tigers and bears that are abused, ready to be euthanized or that have invaded human spaces, Shayleen said. One such tiger was Maverick, who had been rescued from a rap artist's home.

"He was a playful kitty, though," Shayleen said. "If I started running, he would chase me, but we didn't need him to do that. The staff didn't want them to get too friendly with humans."

Ralph and Jennifer Stahley both said Make-A-Wish really did it all. With the help of the Make-A-Wish team, the entire trip was arranged for the family.

“Amy (Kelly) was really amazing and so helpful,” Jennifer Stahley said.

“They were there at the first place to meet us and get things worked out,” Ralph Stahley said. “Then they let us go out on our own and have fun.”

During the weeklong trip the family visited the San Diego Zoo, the beach and Safari Park, where the two girls rode in a hot air balloon. They also got to see a retired Naval aircraft carrier and the only two nuclear carriers in active service.

The Make-A-Wish website states the organization believes that granting wishes to children will lift their spirits and empower them to fight harder against their illnesses, as well as improve the quality of life for the entire family.

“All my happiness was all up,” Shayleen said. “It was great to spend the week seeing all the animals and spending time with my friend.”

Ralph Stahley said it helped the whole family.

“It was a much needed vacation from the everyday stuff,” he said. “I learned a lot on the trip, too.”

Shayleen still has dreams, and like most middle school kids her age, she isn’t too sure what all those dreams are, but her heart is big and the sky is the limit.

One thing she does know for sure is that she wants to give back and help others. The family was able to ride in the Labor Day parade with Make-A-Wish, and Shayleen donated her hair to Locks of Love when it first started to fall out.

“Her hair was past her butt,” Jennifer Stahley said. “That was a hard one for me, but she wanted to donate it. She could have worn a wig, but was OK being bald.”

“I didn’t mind,” Shayleen said. “I just put a baseball hat on.”

Jordyn stepped in to help then, too.

“I would let her do my hair whenever she wanted,” Jordyn said.

Jennifer Stahley said this process has made them all aware of how many children face various forms of cancer. They are very thankful for the many people who have encouraged them along the way, especially the Make-A-Wish team.

As Shayleen and Jordyn wrestled around a bit, she said they would continue to help others by walking in the Relay for Life next month.