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Field hockey marathon for Dreams Take Flight

By Mary Collett
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Vinnie Di Rollo and John Picone share a dream.

It is a dream that would see more than 50 Oakville youngsters who normally live life shackled to wheelchairs and walkers, take flight and soar through the heavens, destined for a day at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, this coming May.

The project, called Dreams Take Flight was started over 10 years ago by Air Canada, which remains the major sponsor of the annual event, donating the plane, with airline personnel volunteering their time to serve aboard the flight.

Di Rollo, whose six-year-old son Christian has a terminal neurological disorder, got involved three years ago, viewing it as an opportunity to "take a negative and turn it into a positive."

Christian has been offered the chance to go on the trip more than once, but Di Rollo has given up his seat to other children whom she feels "can get more out of the experience."

The sheer logistics of sending Christian, who neither walks nor talks, and requires feeding and oxygen tubes, as well as medication to help control seizures, would be staggering. Recently, the disease robbed Christian of his ability to see, and even to smile.

Perhaps because of this, Di Rollo, more than most, treasures the thought of a child's eyes aglow at the magical sight of a favorite Disney character, or a beaming grin stretched from ear to ear at the very prospect of so miraculous an adventure.

Such a dream came true last year for April Ward-Therault's seven-year-old son, Clayton.

At nine months of age, after a battery of tests, Clayton was diagnosed with a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy.

Ward-Therault feels "lucky" that Clayton's mind is "still

sharp as a whip." While able to walk on his own, she expects he will soon need a walker to get around. As his muscles weaken, he will need a wheelchair.

"He's had 7 1/2 wonderful years, but he'll soon be needing a walker," she adds.

Ward-Therault recalls that she "cried" from the moment she received the phone call telling her that Clayton had been selected for Dreams Take Flight last year.

She explains that for many of these kids, "time is of the essence. Parents can't save and plan for the future because there's just too much uncertainty, and the window of opportunity is limited." And she emphasizes that "now is the time for a lot of these kids."

Since volunteer caregivers were already in place, Ward-Therault did not accompany Clayton on the whirlwind holiday, but she "heard about it for weeks." In fact, she laughingly reports that "he's still talking about it."

The children spend only one day at Disney World, flying there and back in less than 24 hours, but during that brief time, they receive V.I.P. treatment.

Before they even board the plane, they're given a gift bag containing Disney souvenirs including a hat, T-shirt, and an autograph book that was signed by Mickey, Goofy, and Donald Duck, to name but a few. Disney representatives are on hand to greet the kids when they arrive, and as the group makes its way through the theme park, each section is closed off, to maximize their access to the rides, attractions and characters.

Ward-Therault points out, that parents of "normal" children can't imagine what it's like to endure long line-ups with special needs kids - many need to be carried on and off the rides.

"More importantly," she notes, "children like Clayton, feel normal when they're with such a group. They don't feel different from the rest."

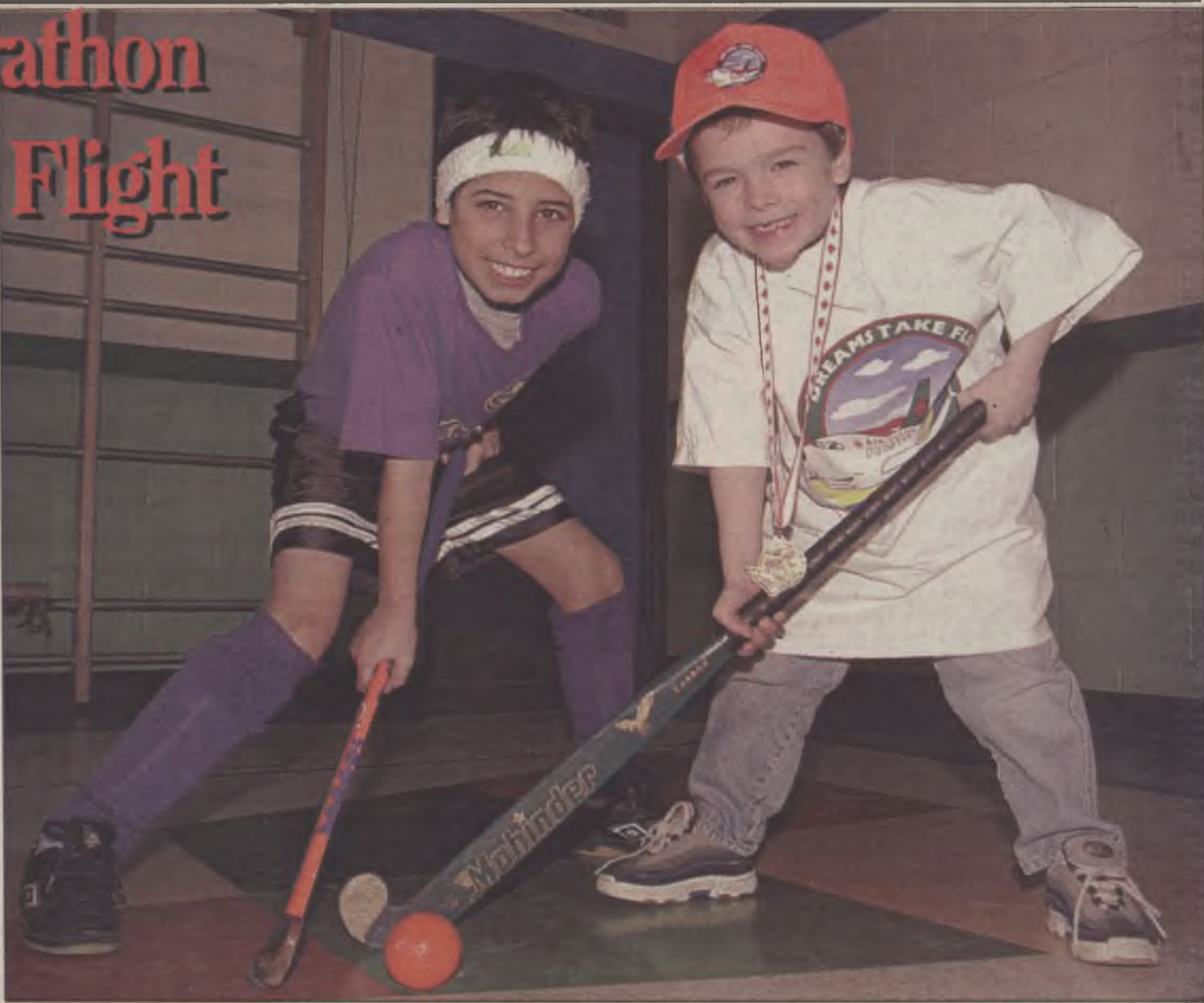


Photo by Barrie Erskine

It appears Gabriel Di Rollo, 9, a member of the Oakville Field Hockey Club, is being challenged for the ball by Clayton Ward-Therault, 7. Gabriel will be participating in Saturday's 12-hour Dream-a-Thon at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School to raise funds for Dreams Take Flight, which takes terminally ill, and physically disabled children, to Disney World in Florida for a day. Clayton, who has Muscular Dystrophy, enjoyed a day at Disney World with Dreams Take Flight last year.

John Picone, self-described "founder and caretaker" of the Oakville Field Hockey Club (OFHC), and a teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School, first became involved in fundraising for Dreams Take Flight last year, inspired by Di Rollo's indomitable example. They participated in a triathlon that raised almost \$12,000.

Their goal this year of \$50,000 is much more ambitious, but says Picone, "whether we raise \$50 or \$50,000, the journey has been amazing."

In order to achieve this goal, the OFHC will host a one-day Dream-a-Thon, a 12-hour field hockey match, this Saturday, March 4th, at St. Thomas Aquinas, Margaret Drive and Lakeshore Road, starting at 9 a.m. Admission is free. There

will be an ongoing silent auction offering everything from original art to a home satellite dish.

Members of Oakville's Kiwanis Club will be serving a pancake breakfast supplied by the Golden Griddle from 8 to 10 a.m., with refreshments and pizza on sale during the day.

As of last Monday, donations can be made at any local branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), with tax receipts available for contributions of \$15 and up.

Picone says that he has been "overwhelmed by the outpouring of donated items, pledges, volunteer assistance and enthusiastic support, which means that every nickel raised can go to the kids."

Although Picone is a teacher by profession, and gives piano

lessons to Christian's 9-year-old brother, Gabriel, he admits, "Christian has been my teacher."

And though Christian is not strong enough to withstand the rigorous demands of a trip to Florida, his mother vows that, "he's definitely going to the Dream-a-Thon, even if it's only for an hour."

Di Rollo regards every day she has with Christian as a gift.

Anyone willing to share in this "gift" can do so at a local branch of the CIBC, or mail pledges to the Oakville Field Hockey Club, 1243 Wood Place, Oakville, ON, L6L 2R4. Cheques should be made payable to: Dreams Take Flight, and must include a full return address in order to ensure a tax receipt. To donate an item or service to the silent auction, call

John Picone at 827-4850. For other information, contact Vinnie Di Rollo at 847-1843.

The Dream-A-Thon will feature a cake-cutting ceremony at 1 p.m. with Mayor Ann Mulvale and the national anthem sung by the Pine Grove School Choir, followed by a Celebrity Match where local celebrities including Councillor Kevin Flynn; Dan Ferrone, retired Toronto Argos; and Larry Cain, gold medal Olympic canoeist; and Carl Coulter, Hamilton Tiger Cats, will join Oakville field hockey Olympians Jean Major (Los Angeles, 1984) and Jim MacDougall (Montreal, 1976).

Along with various sports celebrities, local field hockey teams, and a tireless corps of volunteers, Di Rollo promises, "Christian will be there."

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