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Special needs children spread their wings and experience flying at Lapeer event

by Ashley Smith | The Flint Journal

Saturday September 27, 2008, 5:00 PM

LAPEER, Michigan -- Some kids were in wheelchairs, others used walkers and a few clung to their parents, but all of them had the opportunity to fly alongside pilots in airplanes Saturday.

Dreams and Wings, Inc. gave special needs children and their families the opportunity to ride in a light airplane for a short trip to view Michigan's countryside at Dupont-Lapeer Airport.

The event meant 5-year-old Nicole Stone, who is developmentally delayed, could experience something new that many special needs don't get an opportunity to do.

"She likes it and she's excited about going up," said John Stone, Nicole's father, of Imlay City. "This is our first time and it's nice for the kids being able to go up in the ride, it's not something we get to do everyday."

The Stones were one of 80 families that participated in the free event that has flown over 5,000 special needs children in 13 years. Along with the plane rides, children could participate in wheelchair basketball, craft projects, and petting alpacas and llamas.

"It's an opportunity for families and children to interact in a non-institutional setting," said Jack Lewis, president of Dreams and Wings. "They don't get a lot of chances to do special normal things."

Lewis, who has used a wheelchair since a truck he was repairing fell and broke his back, became a pilot after the accident to prove people with disabilities could do the extraordinary.

Although he didn't fly any children on Saturday, Lewis has flown more than 1,000 kids.

"I had given up on all my dreams and realized it's not uncommon for families and children to do the same," Lewis said. "You tend to just focus on survival and don't think about our dreams. Life without dreams and goals is pretty narrow. I thought maybe I could do something and dare them to dream."

The organization has 45 volunteer pilots from across Michigan that donate their time and planes to provide rides for kids, with a few even allowing the kids to take control of the planes themselves.

The rides, which took children and their families about 2,000 feet in the air for about 20 minutes also gave families who had lost a special needs child to drop a white feather from the plane ride in their memory.

"My two children, husband and I will go up and release a white feather in memory of our daughter, Addison," said Nicole Wetherford, 30, of Lapeer.

Addison, who was 16 months old, died a month ago from a rare genetic disease known as Leigh's disease.

"It's very special for us," said Wetherford, who also invited Addison's grandparents to watch.

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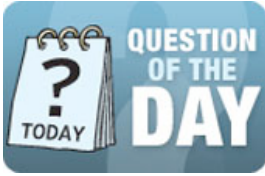
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Lewis said regardless of whatever disability many children have, all of them would have the opportunity to ride in the planes.

"Having a disability doesn't have to stop you from doing unique things," Lewis said. "Hopefully, we'll plant a seed or two to help them see their horizons."

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