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Trip to remember

By JOE VANHOOSE - Athens Banner-Herald Published Tuesday, December 14, 2010

Doug Toma and Linda Bachman hope their 7-year-old son, Jack, holds on to a lot of memories from the family's trip to New York last month.



Doug Toma, Linda Bachman and their son Jack, 7, took a trip to New York City recently courtesy of the the Jack & Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation.

The Statue of Liberty. The Broadway show. The Four Seasons. Those are all sights one doesn't quickly forget.

But as the years go by, Toma hopes his son clings most tightly to the smiles and laughs the family shared on what could be their last family vacation.

Toma, who turns 47 this month, is battling the final stages of melanoma cancer. The University of Georgia professor has benefited from a clinical drug trial, which has given him back his energy and appetite, but he knows his remaining time is measured in weeks and months.

His biggest priority since doctors found the cancer in August has been his family.

"When you have a terminal illness, your child is really what you're thinking of," he said. "My job is to create a legacy and memories for him."

That's what the Jack & Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation focuses on. The Atlanta charity organization has sent nearly 400 families with a terminally ill parent on their dream vacation.



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Jon Albert started the charity four years ago after he lost his wife, Jill, to breast cancer. He saw firsthand not just how the disease attacked her, but also their two young children.

Albert formed a coalition of oncologists across the state and soon realized there wasn't any organization out there quite like Jack & Jill.

"Unfortunately, the easiest thing for us has been to find young parents dying from cancer and leaving their kids behind," he said. "Young children have to say goodbye to their mom or dad. It's the most trying of times."

Jack & Jill offers WOW! Experiences for families facing the inevitable, giving them the chance to spend some quality time together. Doctors from 102 different cancer centers refer patients, who have a few months to live, to the agency.

Albert and his small staff work with donors and companies like AirTran, Starwood and Marriott to put together trips at no cost to the families. Kodak even makes a personalized photo album for each trip.

"We're dealing with families who have battled a disease for even a few years; the emotions are so raw and genuine," Albert said. "The trip is relief. We're about building positive family

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memories.

"We're not about dying. We're about living. This is Mickey Mouse and ball games and roller coasters and award shows - that's what we're about."

Jack & Jill has sent families from 36 states now to Hawaii and California, New York and Nashville, Tenn. Families have had WOW! Experiences at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, CMA Awards and The Grammys.

In New York, Toma and his family stayed at the Four Seasons Hotel, saw "The Lion King" on Broadway and a boat tour to see the Statue of Liberty.

"We really had a great time," he said. "The whole idea was to create and capture memories. I feel like we did that."

Soon, the Toma family will have its photos and appreciation message on Jack & Jill's website, www.jajf.org. The messages from other families on the site - while their experiences and trips are different - all find common ground.

Words like "cherished," "indispensable" and "grateful" show up again and again.

"We hear over and over again that it's a tangible impact," Albert said. "It really hits you when you look at all the photos and realize that a lot of those people are gone."

Toma still has more time, thanks to the experimental treatment he has received.

His days are rather normal now. He's still able to teach at UGA's Institute for Higher Education and fly to Boston for the treatment by himself.

But his condition is terminal.

"It's like a football game where you keep kicking outside kicks," he said. "I may be down five touchdowns, but I keep recovering them. I'm just enjoying the weeks and months as they present themselves."

His first priority still is his family. He has more quality time to spend with Bachman and Jack. As for that quality time in New York, he knows Jack will hold that dear.

"I have a feeling he'll never forget it," he said.

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swhitney

Tue., Dec 14 @ 10:03:29 am

629 posts

Our prayers are with you, Doug. Thanks for your legacy with Global LEAD!



gofast

Tue., Dec 14 @ 10:40:48 am

67 posts

God bless you and your family. I can not imagine what you are going thru.

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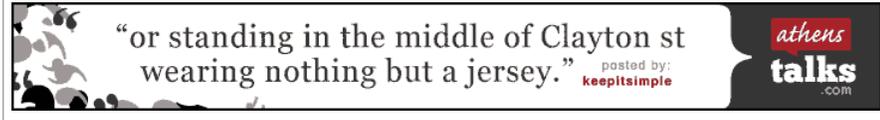
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