

Ski Trip for Disabled Pediatric Cancer Patients

Family Matters - Winter 2011



Mountains, Snow and Skiing ...

In January, pediatric cancer patients from MD Anderson's Children's Cancer Hospital took off to Park City, Utah to hit the slopes. This was the 29th trip for the young patients, who learn every year that they can still conquer the mountains and get past the obstacles placed in their way by cancer.

Norman Jaffe, M.D., retired pediatric oncologist/hematologist from the Children's Cancer Hospital, originated the annual trip in 1982 and was back again this year with his wife. The trip was originally inspired by his former patient, Ted Kennedy Jr., an amputee who learned to ski.

With young Ted as an example, Jaffe found that learning — or relearning — to ski with an amputation or other physical disability fills young patients with self-confidence. "I discovered that skiing proves to them that they can do most anything they set their mind to," Jaffe says.



"The ski trip is a cornerstone of our rehabilitation efforts," says Hallie Zeitz, who has helped coordinate the trip with Linda Blankenship, a program manager in the Children's Cancer Hospital. "It's definitely a turning point for many of the children and the change in their attitude and self-confidence becomes evident over the course of the trip. We often have participants who never talk or interact begin playing cards and laughing and talking with the group. The rehab effect is wonderful, but the psychosocial benefits are astounding."

Mike Kelly, a local attorney and former patient and amputee, has been along for the swish down the slopes from the beginning. Though he is long past the age of a pediatric patient, Kelly serves as an

example of hope to the young patients who head for the mountains. Kelly confirms, “Skiing gives you confidence to realize you can do the same stuff everyone else can do.

“Amputation is a hardship, but it can be overcome,” he says. “I always have a blast on this trip and it proves you can get through cancer and have a good life.”



This year, 14 young skiers made the trip in January. At the Park City Mountain Resort in Utah, they headed to the National Ability Center to be fitted for skis — 3-track, 4-track, mono-ski or bi-ski.

The National Ability Center's alpine skiing and snow-boarding program works in cooperation with the professional ski school staff of the Park City Mountain Resort. Many of the MD Anderson skiers are osteosarcoma patients with amputations and limb salvages, and they all had lessons on the slopes of the ski resort, automatically "mainstreaming" them into an integrated environment with their families, friends and peers.



Accompanied by a group of Children’s Cancer Hospital physicians, nurses, child life workers, volunteers and parents, the group visited the National Ability Center Ranch to take turns on the

climbing wall and also enjoy dinner. Snow tubing was another activity the patients participated in – and there was also a little free time built in.

This annual activity is part of the extensive pediatric psychosocial program at the Children’s Cancer Hospital. The trip is primarily funded by the Children’s Art Project at MD Anderson, which also funds the child life program, education program, summer camps, college scholarships and more.

This nonprofit endeavor sells products created from the artwork of young cancer patients, with proceeds going to programs aimed at making life better for children with cancer.

The ski trip also receives donations from other groups. This year, Texas Senator Troy Fraser came along on the trip and brought a gift of \$8,000 collected from other Texas senators. Over the past four years, this same group has donated more than \$18,000.

<http://www.mdanderson.org/publications/family-matters/issues/2011-winter/pediatric-cancer-patients-ski.html>