

Disney trip will be bittersweet

Terminal cancer patient Debbie Burns hopes visit will create 'good memories' for her family



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Photo by Bob Tymczykyszyn

For years, Debbie Burns has dreamed of going to Walt Disney World for her 40th birthday.

On Saturday, that desire will become reality when, at 8 a.m., the Burns family boards a plane at Buffalo airport for a trip to the land of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.

The event, however, will be bittersweet.

Burns, mother of three young daughters and wife of 18 years, suffers from non-Hodgkins lymphoma. She has terminal cancer.

The week-long vacation to Florida is meant as a chance for the family to create exciting, enduring memories. It comes compliments of the Fort Erie-based charity foundation Dreams to Memories.

"I wish we didn't have to do this trip for this reason," confessed Debbie's husband Mark, as he sits in their north St. Catharines home.

He continued: "You get excited about it in one sense, but then..." he looks to Debbie.

"I know there will be some tears, too," she added. And sure enough, the tears flow.

Debbie's doctor hasn't given her a date, but she knows that by December her health will have greatly deteriorated.

Her chemotherapy has ceased. She uses a wheelchair sometimes, for long distances. She's begun taking pills to ease the pain from the tumour in her chest.

It was less than two months ago that Debbie and her family were told her cancer had returned. She thought she was in remission, after undergoing a year and a half of chemotherapy.

"At first you have to get over the idea that the trip is necessary," said Debbie, sitting in her brightly decorated living room, her husband in a chair opposite and her children — acting like children— running in and out.

Debbie said the grace of others and her faith in God have helped her through this difficult time.

"I want to express our gratitude for the amount of love that has been offered to our family," she said.

"This is where we say God is good and really looking after our family."

While Debbie is still working as an interior decorator, she said that will have to end soon. Mark is a labourer with a landscaping company.

"We could never have afforded to do this," said Debbie.

The Harbour Fellowship Church, where the family has worshipped for eight years, has given the family food and spending money. Dreams to Memories has contributed the airfare and hotel. Neighbours just dropped off three backpacks for their children.

Red-headed Devan, 9, excitedly shows off hers. Gifts fall out of it like toys from a stocking at Christmas. There's a wallet with \$15 US cash, there's bubblegum (she's already opened hers), tissue paper and a camera with film.

The last time the family went to Disney World, before three-year-old Emma was born, Debbie took all the photos, so she's not in them.

This time, thanks to the three new cameras the children received, that won't happen.

Emma, with her twin blond pigtails that hang in perfect ringlets, said she wants to meet Mickey Mouse.

Oldest sister Megan, 13, is going to conquer the Tower of Terror — "There's no way I'm not doing it." Last time she was too scared to go inside.)

Devan says their hotel room has three televisions, Nintendo and a "great big pool."

Mom and Dad smile as the children unleash their excitement.

“Disney World, what a great place to gather good memories,” said Debbie.