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'Happy in the chair'

Justin McGlynn goes surfing, rides zip line in Costa Rica

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By MAUREEN DOLAN/Staff writer



HAYDEN - Holly McGlynn was stunned last March when she received a Facebook message from Christiaan "Otter" Bailey, a professional surfer and skateboarder.

Bailey offered the McGlynn family, of Hayden, an all-expense-paid trip to Costa Rica where McGlynn's 8-year-old son, Justin, would be able to surf the ocean waves and soar by zip-line high above the rainforest.

"I had to call him. I said, 'Is this for real?'" McGlynn said.

It was, and McGlynn called it a "miracle."

Last month, McGlynn and Justin, who has cerebral palsy and cannot sit, stand or walk on his own, went on the adventure.

The 10-day trip was sponsored by Ocean Healing Group, a nonprofit that provides adaptive sports adventures for children with disabilities.

Ocean Healing was co-founded by the 30-year-old Bailey, a year after he crashed his skateboard while filming a video in California. Bailey suffered a spinal cord injury and is paralyzed from the waist down.

He immediately returned to surfing and took up the sport of chairskating, and continues to do both professionally.

"The beautiful thing was to be able to hook up with someone like that," McGlynn said.

While in Costa Rica, McGlynn spent time with Bailey, and had a chance to pose a question she said she often ponders as a special needs mom. "I asked him if there was a cure, would he want to be cured?" she said.

Bailey told her that he wouldn't want to, that he's "happy in the chair."

McGlynn was relieved and thrilled.

"That's what I teach my son, to be happy in the chair," she said. "You might be wheelchair bound, but you don't have to be bound by the chair."

Getting Justin out on the board took some work, she said. Eight volunteer surfers surrounded him as he moved through the waves.

"I did like it, but I didn't like when the salt got in my mouth and my eyes," Justin said with a laugh.

His eyes light up when he talks about Jacob, another child at the surf retreat while the McGlynns were there.

"He's 13, and he's a really funny guy," Justin said.

Being around the surfers and Bailey was a positive experience for Justin, McGlynn said. It matured him and has given him a new confidence.

It was a growth experience for McGlynn also.

When it was time for Justin's zip-line ride through the jungle, McGlynn was told she had to do it with him. She didn't want to, but she didn't let it stop her.

"I conquered my fear, and it's changed me," McGlynn said.

The other miraculous aspect of the trip, for McGlynn, was the timing.

"It was the best vacation of all," she said.

And it came at a time in the McGlynns' lives when vacations are out of the question.

The family moved to North Idaho from southern California in October, after Justin's dad, Walt, lost his job when the Mercedes Benz plant where he had worked for 27 years was shut down.

Walt didn't go on their Costa Rican adventure, McGlynn said, because he had to stay behind and continue looking for work.

They came to Kootenai County because Walt's family is here, McGlynn said.

"We wanted a better, more simple life for Justin," she said.

Information: <http://oceanhealinggroup.org/>