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By

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Dreams Come True fulfills dream for Mandarin teen



Mateo Seslija (second from right) traveled to Washington, D.C. with his family on June 20. (Courtesy Dreams Come True)

Nearly a year after he was diagnosed with a cancerous germ cell tumor, Mandarin resident Mateo Seslija was on his way to Washington, D.C.

The five-day trip, which began on June 20, was made possible by Dreams Come True, a Jacksonville-based non-profit that grants dreams to children battling life-threatening illnesses.

“[Experiences like this] give us hope,” Seslija said. “When someone says they can make your dreams come true, it gives you something to look forward to.”

Seslija, a recent graduate of Mandarin High School, was diagnosed with the tumor last July and received several rounds of chemotherapy. “For me, it was a giant countdown to the end of the chemo sessions,” the 18-year-old said. “Every time I looked in the mirror I saw my shiny head.”

Seslija's mother, Sanela, said nothing compared to receiving the news that her son had cancer.

"The doctor called the day we were supposed to travel to Europe for vacation to visit family and I was crying and everyone was trying to deal with the news on their own," she said. "The next day, I got up and put makeup on to cover-up the bags under my eyes and said 'let's do what we have to do.'"

Seslija was deemed cancer free in November while applying to colleges and getting ready for prom and graduation.

"We realized we never took the time to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that he was cancer-free," Sanela said.

Seslija chose Washington, D.C., as his dream destination due to his love of history.

"I'm a history buff and I like looking back through time," he said. "It was an experience I could have never done in my life."

The trip included a tour of the White House, Ford's Theatre, the International Spy Museum and Newseum museum, as well as lunch with a lieutenant general at the Pentagon.

"The private tour of Ford's Theatre was one of my favorite parts," he said. "I also really enjoyed eating lunch with the general, because he explained the operations and I felt like I was getting an insight into top secret stuff."

Seslija's trip to Washington, D.C., was sponsored by Miller Electric Company.

Sheri Criswell, executive director of Dreams Come True, said the organization's mission is to fulfill dreams for every child from the First Coast who is battling a life-threatening illness.

"We serve the children and their families throughout their medical journey and rely on the generosity of our local community to make dreams possible," she said. "It is because of support from our community that we have never denied an eligible child a dream or started a waiting list."

Seslija is headed to Tampa this fall to attend the University of South Florida to study chemistry in hopes of becoming an oncologist.

"When I was in the hospital, I walked laps and looked through the doors and saw kids who didn't deserve to be there," he said. "I want to do everything I can to help them and hopefully one day I can."

For more information on Dreams Come True, call (904) 296-3030 or visit www.dreamscometrue.org.

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