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Local News

Visually Impaired Boy Soars At Space Camp

Rochelle Eisenberg
Staff Reporter

OCTOBER 12, 2007

For most youngsters, a ride in a flight simulator and a trip to Space Camp would be awesome. For Matthew Lipsey, 10, it was that and so much more.



Matthew Lipsey flies over "Florida" using special technology for the visually-impaired. (Photo Provided)

Matthew, a fifth grade student at Chatsworth Elementary School in Reisterstown, has Stargardt macular ordystrophy, a genetic eye disease that has robbed him of much of his sight. Today, he has less than 10 percent of the vision sighted children have, and is considered legally blind.

Despite this disability, he joined 161 other visually-impaired students in Hunstville, Ala., last month for a week at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. During the special session of Space Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students (SCIVIS), Matthew participated in fighter pilot training as part of the "Aviation Challenge."

He learned what it's like to fly 10,000 feet in the air without oxygen, was lowered into the water from a helicopter and had to swim out of the vehicle, and flew in a flight simulator over "Florida."

This was Matthew's second year at SCIVIS. This year, he also learned about fighter planes and how airplanes fly. Last year, he learned about rockets and zero gravity.

SCIVIS uses enlarged print, close-captioned television and advanced technology such as voice enhancers, donated by sponsors, to help the students participate in some of the same challenges as youngsters who are not visually-impaired.

More important, according to Frank Irzyk, Matthew's itinerant teacher of the visually impaired who accompanied the 15 blind Maryland students to Alabama, the program enables visually-impaired students to meet others like them.

"Often, students who are visually-impaired are somewhat isolated. They represent a low incidence of the population and don't often meet other children like them," he said. "The big thing here is being able to make friends with people around the country who are going through the same challenges and can help out."

SCIVIS began in 1990 as a program of the West Virginia School for the Blind and the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. The program provides youngsters with the opportunity to participate in Space Camp programs that children without visual-impairment enjoy.

Matthew learned about the camp from Mike Rowley, a representative for Enhanced Vision, who sells adaptive products to Baltimore County Schools. Mr. Rowley also raises funds to send these children to SCIVIS, and Matthew received a scholarship to attend the program.

Matthew's disease was discovered shortly before he turned 6. According to his mother, Mindy, he was holding

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books close to his face — basically touching the pages with his eyes — and sitting on the top of the television. Taking him to a pediatric ophthalmologist, she learned glasses were not going to solve the problem.

Matthew wrote poignantly of that day in an essay he used to apply to Space Camp, and one which was submitted in a Baltimore County Public School's literary competition and earned him first place among fourth graders.

He talked about how he thought he was going to the eye doctor to get glasses. When the doctor dilated his eyes, he told his mother, "There's something else going on here." (See sidebar).

Stargardt's often begins damaging both eyes between the ages of 6 and 20. Vision loss is usually slow at first, then rapidly progresses to 20/200, which is considered legally blind. Matthew's vision is currently 20/320.

Initial symptoms include difficulty reading, a longer length of time to adjust between light and dark environments and gray, black or hazy spots in the center of vision. The disease has a strong genetic component.

"It gave me a lot of traits I wouldn't have had if I didn't have this eye disorder," said Matthew.

In his essay, Matthew mentioned that he hopes one day to be a nuclear engineer. He concluded with these telling words: "I know I won't let Stargardt's get in my way."

Excerpts from Matthew's Essay "Day of Diagnosis. The Day That Changed My Life Forever"

"The doctor asked me to leave the room to speak to my Mom in private. I remember pressing my ear up to the door to try to listen. I heard lots of big words that I didn't understand. My mom came out of the room and it looked like she was crying.

Mom told me to put sunglasses on because the sunlight really hurt your eyes when they are dilated. That's because your pupils get bigger and it lets more light in.

"My Mom brought me home and ran downstairs to get on the internet to do research. Then Mom told Dad.

"Since I was only 6, my Mom told me only what she thought I could understand at that age. She said other kids had better sight than me, but that's all I remember back then. Over the last 4 years, My Mom has always been honest with me and she answers all my questions."

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