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Partnership helps grant Hollywood girl's wish

By Jodie Needle, Special Correspondent

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Meeting Disney characters Goofy and the Little Mermaid is what 6-year-old Jessica from Hollywood wants most.

Her wish will come true in March when she and her family will travel to Disney World through the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Southern Florida, which has granted more than 8,000 wishes since its inception nearly three decades ago.

The nonprofit organization helps children with life-threatening conditions or diseases, said Norm Wedderburn, president of the local chapter, which serves 13 counties.

Jessica has sickle cell anemia, which affects red blood cells that deliver oxygen throughout the body. Her week-long trip will include a variety of activities, including a Disney character breakfast, Wedderburn said.

"We depend on the support of the community to do our mission," Wedderburn said. "We do not have federal funding, and we do not charge for our services. We have no funding at all other than a kind and caring community."

The granting of Jessica's wish is thanks to Cypress Financial Group, an office of MetLife that has locations throughout South Florida.

The company announced a partnership with the Make-A-Wish Foundation during a recent event at the Jet Runway Cafe Hangar at Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport. About 1,300 people attended the client appreciation party, where the blimp flew overhead and Snoopy mingled with guests.

"One of our biggest core values is giving back to communities with which we do business," said Gil Cohen, managing director of Cypress Financial. "If you grant a wish to a child who is sick, I don't think there is anything more rewarding than that."

Each year, the foundation receives referrals for children by health care providers, social workers, family members, and even the children themselves.

Wishes typically fall into one of four categories: something children wish to be, someone they want to meet, somewhere they want to go, or something they wish to have. The most popular request is to visit Disney World.

The local chapter receives about 700 referrals annually and was able to grant about 500 wishes last year, Wedderburn said.

To be eligible, a child who has been diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition needs to be between the ages of 2.5 and 18 at the time of referral and must not have already had a wish granted, he said.

The local chapter will host a 5K walk/run fundraiser called Walk for Wishes on Feb. 4 in [Broward County](#) and another on Feb. 18 in Miami-Dade County.

For more information about the organization, call 954-967-9474 or visit <http://www.sfla.wish.org>.

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