

Wish Granted: Make-A-Wish brings eleven-year-old to coast

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When the Make-A-Wish Foundation asked Gabriella Molina for her wish, the 11-year-old from Wells, Minnesota had a quick answer.

She wanted to meet Ellen DeGeneres.

Gabriella's mother, Heather Molina, said that apparently Gabriella would have needed to wait until she was 14 in order to make that happen. And Gabriella was inclined to wait, but her mother convinced her not to put off her wish.

"I told her that there is way-cooler stuff out there than Ellen. So I told her to start looking and to Google 'Sightseeing in California,'" Heather said.

"She is super into nature and weather. She loves that kind of stuff. On her phone she has an app and she will just randomly walk around telling us the weather.

"She is really into science, history and all of that fun stuff. She is kind of like my little nerd."

After a bit of research, Gabriella decided on visiting the northern California coast.

"Her brother had always wanted to go to Glass Beach after he saw pictures of it online," Heather said. "I hate to break it to you, but that was so overrated. She enjoyed the redwoods way more than she did Glass Beach."

Although Glass Beach turned out to be a bit of a letdown, Heather said the rest of the trip was great, starting with the multi-day drive from Minnesota to the West Coast.

“We made the best of we could with our time,” Heather said. “On the drive out, she got to see Mount Rushmore, the Salt Flats in Utah, and we came up through Reno, (Nevada).

“So it was really an awesome drive out.”

Once in California, staff from Redwood Parks Conservancy, the official nonprofit partner of Redwood National and State Parks, met the family at park headquarters in Crescent City.

According to a press release from Redwood Parks Conservancy, all of the family members became honorary Junior Rangers and were given special redwood souvenirs to commemorate the visit.

“She loved the redwoods. She thought they were spectacular,” Heather said. “We spent a whole day driving and hiking up through the redwoods.

“I don’t even remember what all we saw, but we took videos and so many pictures and it seemed like each place just got better.

“She asked me, ‘When can we go back? I want to go back,’ so I think I might have a California girl at heart.”

Heather said Gabriella also greatly enjoyed her time at Moonstone Beach, where the family stayed.

“The house that we were at, the beach was almost like a private beach,” Heather said. “We saw about three people over the entire five days we were staying there.

“She liked it because it was private and secluded, and even when we went hiking, there wasn’t a tremendous amount of people.

“There is enough space to go around for everybody. It was so magical.”

Although the Molinas have lived in Minnesota for the last two years, Heather said they originally are from North Carolina. So it wasn’t Gabriella’s first time seeing an ocean.

But it was her first attempt at surfing, complete with a registered surf coach to show her the ropes.

Initially, Heather wasn’t sure how Gabriella would do on a surfboard, given her battle with Fanconi anemia, a rare and life-threatening recessive genetic disease that claimed the life of her older brother, Manuel, just seven months ago.

“I worried because of the condition that she has,” Heather said. “Her brain is misshapen, so it causes her to have coordination and balance issues.

“But she did really fantastic. I was worried she wouldn’t even be able to get up on a board, but she got up on it and she did great.”

During their adventure, the Molinas also made trips from Moonstone Beach to Del Norte. “We loved going up to Crescent City,” said Heather.

“She had a little restaurant that she loved right there in the harbor (Fisherman’s Restaurant), and we just had a great time.

“We made three or four trips up to Crescent City just because we liked the area. It is a perfect little town for an outsider to see.

“I know living there is always different, but coming through it was just like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I could live here in a second.’”