

## Three-time cancer survivor gets a 'Dream Day' from a blue genie

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Any afternoon she doesn't have to spend inside a doctor's office, operating room or therapy clinic, Astrid Nicastrì considers a pretty good day.

So when a tall man in a red suit, wearing a blue genie mask, and driving a red Ferrari, pulled up to Nicastrì's Miami home Monday and surprised the three-time cancer survivor with a "Dream Day" of activities, she could utter only one word.

"Wow."

Then Nicastrì, 32, packed an overnight bag and took off with the genie for an afternoon of magic: jet boating on Biscayne Bay, swimming with dolphins at Miami Seaquarium, and touring Miami Beach in a GoCar.

The action-packed itinerary beat what Nicastrì had scheduled instead: a session of tai chi and an hour of counseling with Dr. Peggy Rios, a health psychologist for The Wellness Community, a support network for cancer survivors.

"I'm so thankful," Nicastrì said before boarding a yellow, 55-foot SuperCat powerboat docked behind Bayside Marketplace. "It's really helpful for me not to think my life has been about sickness. . . . It's behind me now!"

Because Nicastrì has been coping with cancer since she was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor in 1989, "she has not had an opportunity to live a normal life," Rios said. "That's her big goal: to feel alive."

Nicastrì's day, which closed with a night's stay at the Cleavelander Hotel, came courtesy of Experience Genie, an online travel company that is granting similar experiences to 10 people nationwide with life-limiting illnesses.

Personified by Joshua Dawson, 34, of Montreal, the genie played host for Nicastrì's dream day, donning the blue, silicone mask and red suit, and accompanying her on the adventure.

"We take people on things they wouldn't normally do," Dawson said of Experience Genie, which launched in January. "You see them overcome their fears and there's a big enjoyment out of that."

Nicastrì was recommended for the dream day by The Wellness Community and Gilda's Club, which recently unified to create the Cancer Support Community.

She has spent much of her life fighting cancer, beginning at age 12 when she was diagnosed with

medulloblastoma, a highly malignant tumor.

After surgery to remove the tumor, and months of cranial and spinal radiation treatment, Nicastri underwent extensive physical therapy -- learning again to walk, speak, hold objects with her hands, and ``deal with gravity," she said.

``I always felt like I was just falling into a bottomless pit," she said.

The most difficult part of recovery, Nicastri said, was accepting that ``I couldn't do all the things my friends did."

She never regained full control of her body. ``I still can't run or jump," she said. ``But I have the capability to do a lot."

Nicastri graduated in 2000 from Hollins College in Virginia, with a bachelor's degree in art therapy and nutrition. She worked as a teacher, volunteered for children's causes, and lived cancer-free until August 2006, when -- midway through earning a graduate degree in special education from the University of South Florida in Tampa -- she was diagnosed with a new brain tumor.

This time, the tumor was benign, and it was safely removed. But in October 2007, Nicastri learned she had advanced stage breast cancer.

She was working as a substitute teacher in Miami-Dade schools, she said, and was determined to live.

``Having cancer," she said, ``makes you realize what's really important in life."

Nicastri's cancer was inoperable, but eight weeks of chemotherapy shrunk the tumors enough that she had a mastectomy. She's now beginning the reconstruction phase, and rebuilding the parts of her life that she feels she has missed.

Feeling the salt water spray her outstretched hand, and the wind blow through her hair during the boat ride, Nicastri talked about her aspirations for the future -- ``I want to help children who are in need, and I want to be an inspirational speaker," she said -- and reveled in the moment, learning new things about her hometown of Miami.

``I never knew all these stars lived here," she said as the SuperCat slowed to an idle around Star Island, and the tour guide pointed to the homes of Gloria Estefan and Will Smith.

``I just love being out," she said, ``the feeling. With all in my life I've been through, I just think about enjoying everything I have around me."

Surrounded by dolphins in a pool later that afternoon, Nicastri kissed one on the nose and rested her cheek on its head. Then she smiled as a photographer took her picture, an image which seemed to say a thousand times over:

This was a good day.