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Hingham family has a Grand Gathering

When Jill Blair of Hingham was chosen as the winner of Bostonherald.com's Walt Disney World Magical Gatherings contest, she knew she had a tough choice to make.

Namely, who would be going with her?

"When we won, the phone started ringing," she said. "Everyone offered us bribes."

Apparently Julie and David Armstrong, family friends from Duxbury, offered the best deal, because they joined Jill, her husband Pat, and their two kids, Kevin, 10; and Kelly, 6; at Walt Disney World for a Magical Gatherings vacation.

Magical Gatherings is a program that allows extended travel groups to plan a Walt Disney World Resort vacation - including exclusive Magical Gathering activities - using an array of new online planning tools.

The Blairs, together with the Armstrongs and their three children, Abby, 10; Christopher, 7; and Jordan, 4, arrived at Disney's Beach Club resort late last week. (Disney's Beach Club Resort lobby - 360-degree QTVR preview)

Thursday morning marked the beginning of the weeklong trip, which kicked off with a character breakfast at the Cape May Café in the Beach Club resort. Classic Disney characters - Goofy, Minnie Mouse and Chip and Dale - roamed through the dining area, signing autographs and visiting with the children.

While getting Chip's autograph, the Blairs and Armstrongs learned how to tell the two apart: Chip has a dark brown nose, "like a chocolate chip."

This was an interesting detail, but it was keeping Kevin Blair away from the fabled Disney theme parks. (The Magic Kingdom - 6.26MB QuickTime video)

"This is the breakfast that never ends," Kevin said, his enthusiasm beginning to get the better of him.

After the breakfast buffet, the kids were eager to get the day started. Kevin's sister, Kelly, had her own idea of what was in store.

"I can't wait until we can go on rides today," she said.

Exploring the theme parks was a recurring theme among the youngsters in the group. Driving to the Magic Kingdom, Christopher Armstrong confessed he was most looking forward to Space Mountain.

"I didn't go to sleep until 3:50 a.m.," he said.

As the upper spires of the instantly-recognizable Cinderella Castle peaked over the trees and anticipation began to grow, a pecking order began to emerge among the attractions, and who wanted to ride what, and in what order.

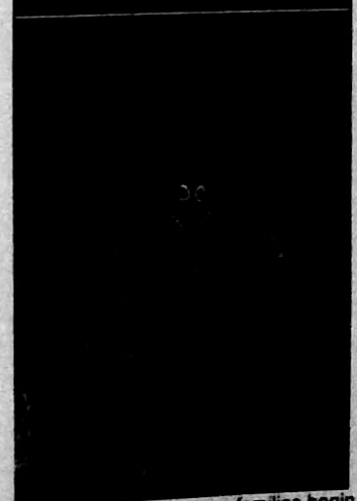
"I'm going on every ride," Kevin Blair said. "But I'm not going on the kid rides. We're definitely going on Test Track."

Test Track, a gate-busting attraction that takes riders through automotive proving grounds, would have to wait for the families' trip to Epcot. But Kevin knew what he liked, and was ready for action.

Once inside the Magic Kingdom, the group wound its way down Main Street U.S.A., through the castle and into Fantasyland where they saw the brand new "Mickey's Philharmagic" - a 3-D attraction featuring a very tangible adventure with Donald Duck, Simba and Tinkerbell. (Mickey's Philharmagic - 9.7MB QuickTime video)

Visitors follow Donald through some of Disney's most popular tales on his quest to capture Mickey's sorcerer hat. The Blairs and Armstrongs caught themselves ducking as flutes appeared to come right out the screen, and enjoying the sensation of flight on a

PHOTO GALLERY



The Blair and Armstrong families begin their Magical Gathering vacation, above, see Mickey's Philharmagic, middle, and spend time with Minnie.

magic carpet with Aladdin.

Air blowing from above and drops of water splashing around completed the 3D effect, which may have been a little too realistic for four-year-old Jordan Armstrong. She cried and hid her face in her dad's shoulder.




The consensus among the rest of the group: Awesome.

Next, the group was introduced to Jim, a Disney cast member who, coincidentally, often goes fishing with Red Sox centerfielder Johnny Damon. After the obligatory discussion about Johnny's unique hairdo, the party assembled near the Partners statue in front of Cinderella Castle for a group photo.







Sufficiently introduced to what lay ahead of them, the Blairs and the Armstrongs went off to explore the Magic Kingdom on their own.

(The Blair family of Hingham was the winner of Bostonherald.com's Disney Magical Gatherings contest.)

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