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**THE FRIENDSHIPS
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-CINDY (MICHAEL'S MOM)

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BY DANA HAZELS SEITH

michael...

THE CLENDENIN FAMILY

Michael Clendenin's middle name should be Fearless. Nothing slows this 7, almost 8-year-old down, despite being diagnosed with Eosinophilic Esophagitis at the young age of 2 ½. The very simplified explanation of his diagnosis essentially means he is allergic to every food except four—potatoes, chicken, broccoli, and oatmeal; the only condiments he can use alongside those foods are—sugar, oil, and salt.

While Michael's diet cannot be adventurous, his life is. During Bert's Big Adventure, Michael rode a plane for the very first time and was thrilled about that. He loved walking through the hanger to catch the flight and bypassing the airport terminal. But, his favorite moment of the trip was riding a roller coaster with Bert...this thrill-seeker rode every single coaster at Walt Disney World.

The trip itself was unbelievable, but Michael's mother Cindy thinks the most incredible thing about the BBA experience was interacting with and meeting all the other families that shared in the trip, she says, "Even though the circumstances are different, we all know what each other goes through everyday just having a child with a chronic or terminal illness." She finishes, "The friendships that we formed on this trip were lifelong."

Michael is very outgoing and does not let his disease stop him, even when he's around other kids who get to eat pizza and hamburgers, he'll eat his chicken and go on like there's nothing different in his life than everyone else. He's also a fighter—just 3 hours after his last surgery where a new gastric feeding tube (G-tube) was put in, he was walking down the hall because he didn't want to be sitting in his hospital bed. Cindy reiterates, "He doesn't want to be down. He wants to be able to do anything any other child can do. At school Michael is not pointed out or given special treatment."

Grace, Michael's younger sister is especially nurturing with him and educated on Eosinophilic Esophagitis, always willing to help when needed. When Michael has his surgeries Grace likes to be by his side to make sure he's okay. When not at school, Michael's favorite activities are playing soccer and video games. Cindy says, "He's just got an amazing willingness to want to do for others even though he has his own issues. Michael doesn't know any different and this is his normal."

Case in point—Michael is in the process of fundraising for an upcoming surgery and medical bills, but has already asked his parents if he can set aside a portion of the money that is raised for him to donate to other kids that might need it as well. The entire Clendenin family is so grateful to the Bert's Big Adventure experience, the memories that they will hold dear in their hearts for years to come. Michael is already dreaming of ways to add more adventure to his life. ✨