



A "suite" celebration in Cinderella's castle

by: barbara nefer

Part of the Celebration mythos is its famed neighborliness. It is often pictured as a town where people wave from their front porches and run next door to borrow a cup of sugar. But it's not just the small things, like cookies or garden implements, that Celebration residents cheerfully share with their neighbors. Some, like the Zabaga family, share the experience of a lifetime.

Joe and Joan Zabaga have lived in Celebration for the past five years, drawn to the town by its close proximity to Disney World. "The location (of Celebration) was pivotal," Joe proclaims. "If it weren't for Disney, we'd be living in The Villages!" Little did they suspect that someday they'd be "residents" of the Magic Kingdom itself, even if just for one magical night.

According to the Zabagas, the day started out with a serendipitous spin on the Great Movie Ride at Disney MGM Studio. They had just ridden the Tower of Terror multiple times, as they often do on Sunday mornings, and around 11 a.m. they decided to make a detour to one last attraction before they left.

Joan said, "We were in the second row of the first car, sitting at the end. When we got off, there were five or six Cast Members all staring at us."

Because she and Joe are frequent visitors to Disney World, they knew about the Year of a Million Dreams celebration and had won several smaller prizes, such as Dream Fastpasses, on previous visits to the theme parks.

But Joan said, "I knew this was different because they weren't carrying anything!"

The Zabagas were asked some qualifying questions, and soon they were surrounded by an even bigger crowd of Cast

Members with a DVD player. In the excitement, Joan said, "I hope we've won a night in the castle!"

When the DVD was played, she discovered that her dream had been magically transformed into reality. She and Joe would indeed be spending the night in Cinderella's royal suite. Ironically, it was the week of her birthday, so her dream prize was also the ultimate birthday gift.

Joan is still amazed by their win. "I knew it was possible," she said, "but when you live here, you never really think it could happen to you."

Because the Zabagas don't have any family in Florida, they asked how long they had to make arrangements for out-of-state relatives to join them. Unfortunately, the answer was, "Two hours!"

"We knew we had to share this prize and that children had to be involved," said Joe. "We're in our 70s, and we wanted to experience this with kids and see it through their eyes."

The Zabagas, who live in the Roseville Corner section of Celebration, immediately thought of their next door neighbors, Alex and Leah Carius, and their triplet sons. As fellow Disney fanatics, the Carius clan has annual passes for frequent visits to the theme parks. They have Disney toys, movies and trinkets throughout their home, and they even named their pet cat "Disney." Who better to share such a "suite" experience with. Leah says, "We were just coming out of church when Alex's phone rang. He was talking to someone, and I could see him getting more and more excited." Soon she was sharing that excitement as they rushed home to pack their bags and join the Zabagas. What had begun as an ordinary afternoon was

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suddenly transformed into a whirlwind day unlike any other they had ever experienced, culminating in a sleepover in the heart of the Magic Kingdom.

Everyone met at the Grand Floridian to drop off their luggage and take care of some formalities. Even a fantasy requires some mundane details, such as the signing of release forms, before the magic can officially begin.

As their day unfolded, the two families soon discovered that their overnight stay in the castle was only one part of their dream come true. It also included serving as Grand Marshals of the parade, being named honorary citizens of the Magic Kingdom, wearing special buttons and "ear" hats, and indulging in a special dinner at Cinderella's Royal Table.

There were balloons and toys for Reese, Alex, and Max, the eight-year-old Carius triplets, and VIP access to all of the rides. The triplets were particularly excited because they learned the secrets of getting a high score on the Buzz Lightyear Ride from the Dream Cast Members. That night, the adults even got a tour of the famous "tunnels" below the Magic Kingdom.

Of course, the main part of the award was the rare privilege of staying in the castle suite, which was built especially for the Year of a Million Dreams promotion. Leah described it as "small but opulent," and both families were dazzled by the level of detail and theming.

All throughout the room, scenes and details from the movie "Cinderella" were incorporated into the decor. They stared in awe at Cinderella's slippers and her coronation crown on display in the foyer. They marveled at the portrait over the fireplace that doubled as a flat screen television set and the luxurious whirlpool with stars twinkling overhead.

"The boys looked for hidden Mickey's, too, but we couldn't find any," Leah laughed.

But perhaps the best detail was the clock with its hands permanently frozen at one minute to midnight so that it could never strike the

hour of twelve and cause the magic to end.

Besides their luxurious surroundings, the families were also treated to delicacies like a white chocolate carriage, crafted in the style of Cinderella's famous pumpkin coach, with chocolate-covered strawberries inside. "It was amazing...a masterpiece!" Leah marvels.

Even though they had a key to the suite door, they had to gain access to the elevator via a Cast Member whenever they wanted to come or go. Inside the suite was a phone where simply pressing "O" would connect them with someone waiting to fulfill any request.

Leah admits it was almost impossible to sleep on such a special night. Instead, she and the other adults stayed awake to savor as much of the experience as they possibly could. Even the boys caught the excitement and stayed up until 1 a.m. watching Disney DVDs. "It was really neat," Leah said. "We had three generations together in the room, all sharing in this incredible time."

But even though midnight never chimed, the sun eventually heralded the unavoidable arrival of morning. There was a 7:30 a.m. wake-up call, since Cinderella's guests are required to vacate by 9 a.m. Joe marveled, "The streets were so empty!" as the families got a rare glimpse of a nearly deserted Magic Kingdom, with only a few Cast Members bustling around to perform their duties.

There was still one more treat in store: a Winnie the Pooh character breakfast at the Crystal Palace. Before returning to the "real world" of Celebration, the Zabaga and Carius clans dined with Pooh, Tigger, and the gang. Then they took one last spin on the Buzz Lightyear Ride to let the boys practice their newfound skills before everyone returned home to recover from their long, exciting night.

Each person had their own favorite part of the experience. For Joan, it was the fulfillment of a longtime wish to be in a Disney parade, while Joe was dazzled by the Cast Members' enthusiasm. "You could tell how much they enjoy their job. It was so genuine, and their enthusiasm spilled over. They really have the ability to make you feel special," he explained.

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For the triplets, there was resounding agreement that it was the abundance of chocolate, while Alex enjoyed being in the most exclusive hotel room on Disney World property. Leah just basked in the warmth of knowing that she lives next door to thoughtful neighbors who invited her family to share in their good fortune.

"We felt like celebrities," she said. "Joe and Joan are the perfect Celebration neighbors, and we'll never forget how they included us in this."

On her next visit to Downtown Disney, Leah found a plate featuring Cinderella's Castle that could be personalized. She purchased one for her family and one for the Zabagas, inscribed with the date of their dream come true, as a special memento.

"I told the Cast Members in the store why I was buying the plates," Leah said, "and they were all so excited! They wanted






to hear every detail." She also plans to take her boys to the barber shop on Main Street very soon so they can tell their regular barber, Mike, all about it.

"I always take them to Mike for their haircuts," she said, "and we've talked

about the castle. He said he's never seen the inside of the suite, so now we can tell him exactly what it's like."

Even though their stay in the royal suite is over, the experience has left a permanent impression on this group of Celebration neighbors. Not only will they cherish their memories of a once in a lifetime prize, but also the joy of sharing the experience. For Joan and Joe, it wasn't just about the winning. It was also about being able to spread the fun and, best of all, to experience it vicariously through the wide-eyed wonderment of children. ■

Barbara Nefer is a free-lance writer in Celebration, Florida, and a member of the Celebration Writers Group.

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