



Frannie Geringer, 8, left, of Orkney, South Africa and Mickey Hays, 9, right, of Hallsville, Texas, met their idols — Pinocchio and Mickey Mouse — in Disneyland, yesterday. The boys suffer from the rare disease, progeria. Frannie journeyed to the United States with his family after an August wire service article told of his struggle against progeria and his dream of meeting Pinocchio. Hundreds of North Americans sent donations ranging from \$1 to \$400 to Frannie's family or contributed to various funds established in his behalf. Texas, meanwhile, raised money to send Mickey to Disneyland at the same time.

A dream comes true for two young victims of a rare disease

By CYNTHIA STEVENS
Associated Press Writer
ANAHIM, Calif. (AP) — Shy, 8-year-old Frannie Geringer, a little old man who, like Pinocchio, longs to be a normal boy, met his fairy-tale idol at Disneyland yesterday after a trip halfway around the world.

It was a wish-upon-a-star dream come true for the wizened, bald child from Orkney, South Africa, who suffers from a rare aging disease called progeria.

While Frannie smiled and giggled at Pinocchio's gestures — but said nothing — a newfound friend from Texas, a victim of the same disease, tweaked Mickey Mouse's ears and nose.

Frannie once thought he was alone in suffering from progeria, which ages its victims 10 times faster than normal, stunts growth and often results in death by the teen years.

The naughty wooden marionette, Pinocchio, has had special significance for Frannie since a Pinocchio doll was put in his crib in infancy. The 19th century storybook character won a struggle to become a normal boy.

"It's not nice to be the only one," Frannie, whose arthritic walk resembles the jerky movements of a marionette, once told his mother.

Then, Sunday, Frannie met 9-year-old Mickey Hays of Hallsville, Texas, and together the little old boys went to Disneyland to meet their favorite characters.

Another progeria victim, 11-year-old Alicia Gowan of San Jose, Calif., arrived at Disneyland yesterday hoping to meet Mickey and Frannie. But she became ill before the meeting could be arranged. Her scheduled meeting with Snow White had to be canceled.

Her mother said Alicia, who is just over 3 feet tall and weighs 23 pounds, had been so excited that she had not slept much the night before.

Mickey and Frannie, meanwhile, toured the park after strolling around and riding a train with Mickey Mouse and Pinocchio.

"That wasn't scary. I want to see something scary," Mickey told a tour guide after riding through the Pirates of the Caribbean attraction.

But Frannie chimed in: "I'm scared of the skeletons. I didn't like that." But other than the bones, Frannie enjoyed the jungle cruise, and waved and giggled at various mechanized animals.

Mickey burst into tears when he accidentally bumped his super-sensitive head, but his mother said reassuringly, "He'll be all right."

Mickey headed straight for Mickey Mouse, the character he most admires because "that's my name."

Frannie, a timid child, giggled throughout the private hour-long meeting as Pinocchio, a traditionally silent character, communicated by gestures.

He didn't speak to his idol, but soon followed Mickey's example and pulled the mouse's ears and nose.

Frannie journeyed to the United States with his family after an August wire service article told of his struggle

against progeria and his dream of meeting Pinocchio. Hundreds of North Americans sent donations ranging from \$1 to \$400 to Frannie's family or contributed to various funds established in his behalf.

Texas, meanwhile, raised money to send Mickey to Disneyland at the same time. The boys have been almost inseparable since they met.

After the private meeting with their heroes, the boys were ushered by Pinocchio, Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters to a group of 50 reporters who had been jostling for position for half an hour.

A Disneyland spokesman asked the reporters to keep the coverage low-key because "physiologically, they are 80 years old and a lot of shouting could put a strain on them or even be dangerous."

Meanwhile, Frannie's parents offered to share with other sick children the donations toward his trip from South Africa.

Some \$26,000 was collected in Florida and the Geringers have asked that half the money be placed in a fund to make dreams come true for other children.

They said the money was far more than they needed because so many hotels, airlines and amusement parks donated services.

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