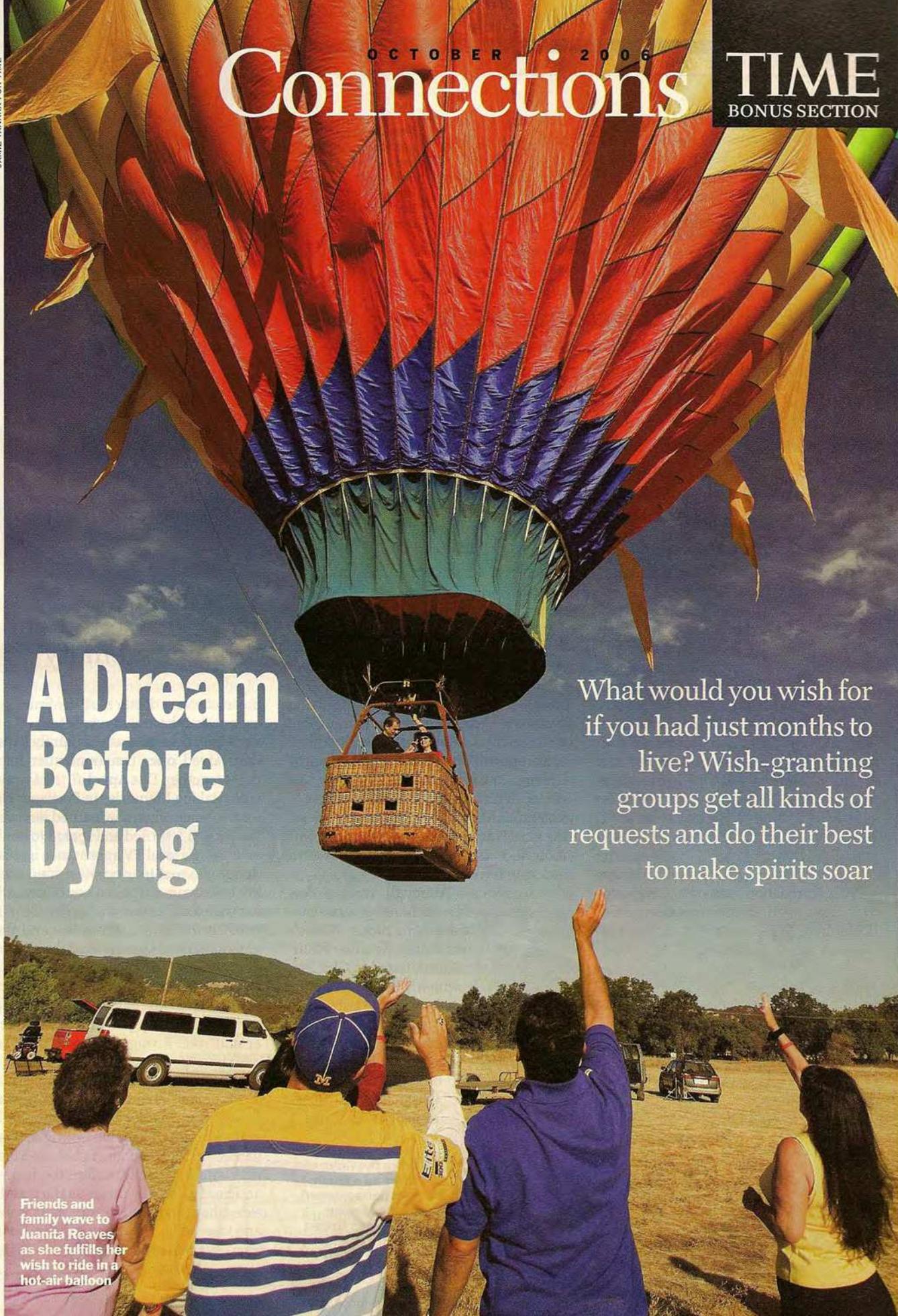


A Dream Before Dying

What would you wish for if you had just months to live? Wish-granting groups get all kinds of requests and do their best to make spirits soar

Friends and family wave to Juanita Reaves as she fulfills her wish to ride in a hot-air balloon



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By **ANDREA COOPER**

IT WAS THE KIND OF MAY AFTERNOON that makes you glad to be alive. Carol Siebert, 58, spent it sailing down a Hemet, Calif., highway in a red convertible, the wind lightly ruffling the hair in her blond wig. Beside her, in the driver's seat, was the car's owner, Sonia Mir, a woman Siebert had never met until that day.

But they connected like old friends, stopping for lunch and getting their nails done. Siebert carried a little pump of pain medication over her shoulder like a purse. Luckily the few flashes of pain she felt passed so quickly that Siebert was able to take a turn at the wheel. "When she called me afterward," says her daughter Michelle Hovey, "you would have thought she'd been to Hawaii and back."

Siebert, who died in July from breast cancer, had her last wish in life—that breezy convertible ride—granted by Dream Foundation. The nonprofit group headquartered in Santa Barbara, Calif., grants wishes to adults nationwide who have 12 months or less to live. Mir, a volunteer, understands what it means to have a dream fulfilled. The foundation gave her son Marcel a birthday bash with friends in formal gowns and dressy suits before he succumbed at age 23 to cancer in 2001. "He came alive for his birthday. He was so happy," Mir recalls.

Most people have heard of the Make-a-Wish Foundation, one of many groups that grant wishes to terminally ill children. Non-

profits that make the wishes of dying adults come true are far less common. The Association of Wish Granting Organizations reports that of its 21 members, only Dream Foundation specifically serves adults. With a projected 2006 budget of \$2.8 million in cash and donated services, Dream Foundation expects to grant about 750 wishes this year to adults with a variety of terminal diseases.

Although rare, a few other national groups share similar missions. There's the Fairygodmother Foundation, based in Chicago, which will use its magic to conjure the last wishes of about 130 adults across the country this year. Making Memories Breast Cancer Foundation grants wishes to recipients with Stage 4

breast cancer; a doctor must confirm the recipient likely has only a year left.

Many dreamers ask for family trips so their loved ones can remember happy times together. Dee Appel, 61, had worked with Making Memories in Portland, Ore., for two years when she learned her breast cancer had returned and spread to her liver. During a local TV appearance in which Appel planned to promote a fund raiser, her colleagues surprised her by awarding her wish for a "grammy camp" in Colorado with her daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren. Appel invited the kids' other grandmother, who had lung cancer, to come along. The grandkids and their two grandmas—both "bald as billiards," Appel says—swam, fished, made s'mores together and rode a wagon drawn by Belgian draft horses.

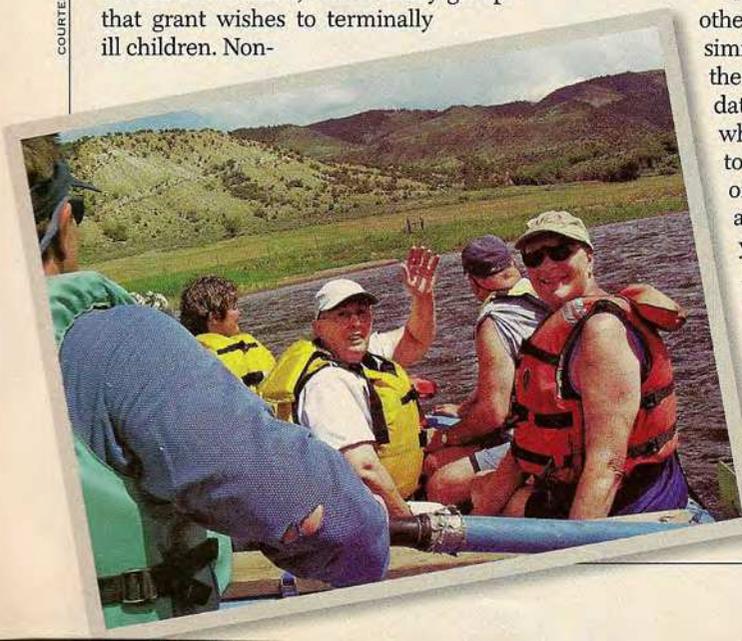
Others choose a certain dream to make a statement about their lives. Juanita Reaves, 49, a mother with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, wished for the freedom of a hot-air-balloon ride with her family. Before the trip, she anticipated looking down on the countryside where she used to run, ride her bike and take walks. "My body is dying, but my mind still has a thirst for life," Reaves said

► After cancer treatment harmed her teeth, Shirley Nelms longed for a new smile. Dentist Roya Akbar donated her services to the dying woman



(A last wish is a chance to make a statement about life or bequeath a happy memory)

COURTESY OF DEE APPEL



◀ Dee Appel rafts down the Colorado River on a family vacation arranged by the Making Memories Breast Cancer Foundation



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in an e-mail. "I hope to show people with ALS and other disabilities that they don't have to be limited to ... only those roads where their wheelchairs will take them."

As profound as the effects can be for the dying, fulfilled dreams can leave an equally poignant mark on the living. They can bring back a semblance of normal life, if only for a few hours or days, for family members who have spent months watching a loved one struggle with disease. For Mary Irvine, whose step-daughter Candice, then 24, wished for a family cruise, the dream allowed her to see a glimmer of Candice as she used to be. "We snorkeled, we hiked up a god-awful hill to a lighthouse, we took ballroom-dancing lessons, we went to the casinos. Candice knew everybody on the ship," says Irvine. A mechanic in the Air Force, Candice died of breast cancer three weeks later.

Dream provid-

on their own or with help from hospice social workers, to complete an application detailing a preferred dream and an alternative. The applicant must meet the group's qualifications. It won't, for instance, grant wishes to people with chronic ailments who aren't terminally ill. Dreamers tend to come from low-income families that have little money for

ers can find themselves changed as well. After years of radiation and chemotherapy had destroyed Shirley Nelms' teeth, Nelms wanted a new smile so her teenage daughter would look at her with pride. Dream Foundation tapped Dr. Roya Akbar, a Marietta, Ga., dentist, for about \$9,500 of donated dental work. Nelms' joy at the result was so moving to Akbar's staff members that, two months after her death, they continue to keep her photo on their computers as a screensaver.

To begin the process of granting a wish, Dream Foundation asks prospective recipients,

extras after illness has depleted whatever savings they had. When approved, a case gets assigned to one of 75 volunteer "dream captains," who organize the project and coax companies into donating products and services. Foundation staff members purchase services such as hotel stays when needed to fulfill a dream.

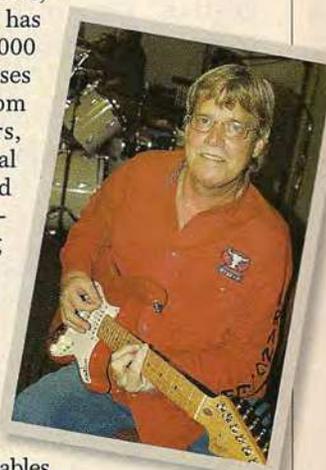
For Donnie Forbis, who hoped to hear his band's original music on national radio, Dream Foundation arranged a broadcast on a Sirius satellite channel, including a party that day with family and friends and a call from celebrity volunteer Priscilla Presley.

For Dorothy Hensley, 89, who longed to be a published writer, the group approached an inspirational website, which posted her personal essay on dying. Both Forbis and Hensley lived to hear from fans. Local television and radio covered Forbis' national debut, and Hensley has received more than 1,000 e-mails in response to her piece.

But dreams aren't always easy to grant. "I've heard 'no' many, many times," says Thomas Rollerson, a former sales executive who founded Dream Foundation in 1994. NASCAR racer Jeff Gordon, for instance, frequently grants wishes to terminally ill children but seldom to dying adults. Rollerson acknowledges that granting children's wishes is more appealing to most companies. "Kids are irresistible, and understandably so," he says.

Keeping the dreams going requires a lot of corporate-sponsorship pitches, auction galas and creative fund-raising tactics. Making Memories, for instance, has sold nearly 10,000 wedding dresses donated from manufacturers, designers, bridal shops and brides themselves during its Brides Against Breast Cancer sales in dozens of U.S. cities annually.

All the fund raising enables wish granters to fill a basic need: they give critically ill people a chance to make a choice that's not about their medical care or funeral arrangements. "When you're in the process of dying, you lose a little control every day," says Stevie Ball, CEO of the Fairygoddmother Foundation. Dreams are an opportunity for the dreamers "to control one of the last pieces of their lives." Though all the groups vie for funding from individuals and companies, "it's the kind of business that really isn't competitive," Ball says. The world needs as many dream providers as it can get. ■



▲ Donnie Forbis plays guitar with his band. Dream Foundation arranged for the group's music to be played on the radio

Dream On

Like to help make someone's last wish a reality? You can donate cash, frequent-flyer miles, hotel accommodations, restaurant meals, car rentals and other services—or be a volunteer.

■ DREAM FOUNDATION

Volunteers are needed nationwide in dream granting and local fund raising. Dreamfoundation.org

■ FAIRYGODMOTHER

FOUNDATION Volunteers can participate in events in the Chicago area or lead fund raisers where they live. Fairygodmother.org

■ MAKING MEMORIES BREAST

CANCER FOUNDATION Companies, foundations or individuals may grant an entire wish or a part of a wish and dedicate it to someone or have it honor a special event. Help is needed to organize Brides Against Breast Cancer events and at-home parties to raise funds. Makingmemories.org