

Boy gets surprise of a lifetime

Cancer survivor's bedroom gets Aussie face lift

By Judd Slivka
Special for The Republic

Eric Feldt left for camp and his bedroom was green.

A week later, his parents turned the corner near their Surprise house and Eric saw a TV truck and the cars of all their neighbors and friends.

"What the — HEY?" he said. And then he saw his room.

Blue walls. Eucalyptus trees. Cargo crates from Australia. Places for his stuffed koalas to hang.

And you thought the first "What the — HEY?" was loud ...

While Feldt, 10 years old and a cancer survivor for about 18 months, was away at a camp in Payson, the Valley non-profit organization A Hand of Hope was redoing his room.

"These kids are so sick they just need a haven," said Pam Walker, the Glendale artist who redid the room with her husband, Garrett. "A lot of them spend a lot of downtime — they can't be exposed to germs or can't go to the store. We wanted to give them a place they didn't want to leave."

Under the loft bed are cargo crates and a TV, a place for Eric to just hang out and play video games. Looking down

from the bed are his koala bears. Everything is about Australia or the koalas, two of Eric's fascinations.

"Now," Walker said, "his parents will never be able to get him out."

A reason to hope

This process started years ago, when Eric was diagnosed with leukemia. His parents heard about A Hand of Hope, a non-profit group for sick kids that, unlike the more famous Make-A-Wish Foundation, grants more than one wish.

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Deirdre Hamill/The Arizona Republic
Cancer survivor Eric Feldt checks out his remodeled room, which was done with an Australian theme.



Deirdre Hamill/The Arizona Republic

Eric Feldt (center) shows off his room to his friends (from left) Jacob Fiori, David Sanders, Beau Birtwistle and Austin Kaupila.

SURPRISE Boy gets new room

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— Pam Walker
Artist who redid Eric's room

"Eric's gotten to meet Jeff Gordon, Tony Hawk, Randy Johnson, Toby Keith," said his mother, Cathy. "He's gone to dozens of baseball games, the zoo, the movies. Every month, he has something to look forward to."

And then a few months ago, the word came from A Hand of Hope's office on 82nd Avenue and Thunderbird Road: we're looking to make over a kid's room.

The Walkers, whose own son is a Hand of Hope participant, had volunteered to do a room over.

"We never got a letter about Eric," Walker said. "We got an e-mail saying 'Eric likes koala bears and Australia,' and we prayed on it and it had a good feeling, so we chose to do Eric's room."

There were other pieces that had to come together. Eric had to be out of the house. He was going to be gone for a week at Camp Sunrise, a camp run by the American Cancer Society. But how could they get him out of the house for the crucial two days of prep?

"Family bonding time," his parents called it. They'd go to a hotel.

The Embassy Suites in Para-

dise Valley stepped in with two free nights.

How would they get supplies? Even with the time and work donated by A Hand of Hope parents, it was still going to cost a lot of money to get everything — the crates, the stickers, the paint, the 6-foot piece of wood that was going to be painted to look like a large tree for the corner of Eric's room.

Garrett Walker's employer, Target, stepped up.

"When he told them what we were doing, they gave us a huge gift card to see that we had everything we needed for Eric's room," Pam Walker said.

Eric, who is in fifth grade at Paradise Education Center in Surprise, has been in remission for more than a year, but the non-profit group still provides activities. And it provides more than that for families. It provides an outlet and an anchor for parents whose fear is second only to their love of their child.

"You never stop worrying," Feldt said. "It's always there in the back of your mind. Every bruise he gets, every ache he tells us about, you wonder: Is this something new?"