

EVERYDAY HEROES

# Your Wish Has Been Granted

*Seniors are seeing their dreams come true, thanks to a former Olympic athlete*

BY Eric Raskin

IT HAD BEEN more than 10 years since they'd all been together like this, and the three sisters' eyes filled with tears. The eldest, Rubye Cox, kept warm under a red plush blanket while her two "kid" sisters, Ruth Branum and Rose Shloss, each held one of her hands.

"You were the smartest one in the family," Rose told Rubye as they sat side by side. "If I had a problem, I always went to you."

They retold their favorite stories, they laughed, and Rose even held 5-month-old Leela, the newest member of the extended family.

Oh, worth mentioning: Rose was more than a century older than the baby in her arms. And that wasn't the largest age gap in the room. Rose was

101 years of age at the time, while Ruth was 104 and Rubye was 110.

These three centenarians were enjoying an overdue reunion, courtesy of Wish of a Lifetime, a nonprofit that flew Rose in from Florida and Ruth from Oklahoma to visit Rubye at her retirement home in Rhode Island.

The charity is the passion project of Jeremy Bloom, a former Olympic skier and practice squad NFL player who was impressed, during his years traveling the world as an athlete, by how much more other countries and cultures seemed to respect and celebrate their elders than what he'd witnessed in America.

"Sometimes we forget here that their dreams still matter," Bloom, 43, reflects.

When he took a trip to Japan for a

CHRIS FERENZI PHOTOGRAPHY



Jeremy Bloom granted Lt. Col. James Harvey's wish to have his fellow Tuskegee Airmen honored at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.



**Bloom reunited three sisters—from left, Rubye, Ruth and Rose—after a decade apart.**

skiing competition at age 15, Bloom watched an elderly woman walk slowly onto a bus in Tokyo, and he was moved by how many passengers bowed to her and extended a hand to help her. In that moment, a seed was planted, though it took 10 years for the seed to germinate into Wish of a Lifetime.

As Bloom competed in the 2002 and 2006 Olympics in the freestyle skiing moguls event, as he caught the longest touchdown pass in University of Colorado history as a freshman, as he got drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles in 2006, he kept wondering what else was out there for him.

“As a professional athlete,” Bloom says, “I had a fear that I would never find purpose in the next chapter, because I would see a lot of great teammates move on and struggle to reinvent themselves.”

In the summer of 2008, Bloom took the steps to form his charitable organization. He wanted to adapt the concept of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which

fulfills requests for critically ill children, to fit folks on the opposite end of the age spectrum—some ailing, others not.

For the first wish he granted, Bloom arranged for airplane tickets for a woman named Nancy so she could visit her daughter, who was dying of ovarian cancer, and say goodbye in person. “I picked Nancy up at the airport after she spent four days with her daughter, and I picked up a totally different human being,” Bloom remembers. Nancy had found needed peace and closure in seeing her daughter one last time.

Today, Wish of a Lifetime has a staff of 26 full-time employees and some 25,000 volunteers nationwide, and is funded by donations and corporate sponsorships. Most wish applications are submitted at [wishofalifetime.org](http://wishofalifetime.org) by a friend or family member. The 3,000 wishes granted so far have all been vetted by a member of the team. A World War II veteran returned to the beaches of Normandy for the first time since D-Day; a woman wrote and performed a play based on her life story; a former Air Force captain got the chance to meet his heroes, the Rolling Stones.

Wish of a Lifetime is not Bloom’s full-time job—he’s currently the CEO of X Games, a series of action sports competitions. But for a long time the charity was his full-time focus.

“It was my 100 percent all in,” Bloom says. “It was: Let’s build a program. Let’s meet the seniors. Let’s change as many lives as we can.” **R**