



# dreamflight:

A film-maker's delight

by Graeme McAlpine

With more than 30 years' experience, GTC Award-winning cameraman Graeme McAlpine has been around the world, has a CV as long as your arm, and has filmed some of the world's biggest and most spectacular sporting and live events for the major broadcasters. But sometimes it's the little jobs, shot on non-broadcast equipment for no money, that really make an impact. For the volunteer cameramen attached to the charity Dreamflight, documenting the results of its work is truly a life-changing experience

Twenty-four hours filming shy, introverted children arriving for a welcome party, departure and flight from London Heathrow, followed by just five hours' sleep, then it's off to Disney's Magic Kingdom: a typical introduction to Dreamflight. And something else – you have to sport a silly tinsel wig and have your nails painted garish colours!

Last year, 2009, was the twenty-third year the charity Dreamflight has worked its magic and I was lucky enough to be able to participate as one of the volunteer cameramen on this wonderful adventure.

Dreamflight is all about inspiring seriously ill and disabled children to achieve things they never thought possible. Once a year, the charity takes 192 deserving children on a holiday of a lifetime to Florida, giving them an opportunity to discover independence, build confidence and develop a whole new outlook on life. Every October a packed chartered British Airways jumbo jet departs for the theme parks of Orlando.

With an active video group of volunteers attached to the project, we take it in turns to help support and film the Dreamflight children and their escorts on these annual trips.

### Memories and money

The charity has two distinct uses for video. Most important is the video diary that captures a lasting memory of the holiday for the children, as well as relaying that experience to parents and other loved ones who have stayed at home. The second function is fundraising and increasing awareness of the charity. Dreamflight is a very visual charity and promoting it is easily understood through the medium of video. Modern-day social media and networking allow video to tell a story immediately, while the intimacy of lightweight filming helps capture and portray the emotion and excitement of the whole Dreamflight experience.

Fundraising is crucial. With so

many needy children travelling at once, a veritable army of nurses, doctors and physiotherapists is required for the journey, and the first-class section of the aircraft is transformed into a temporary flying hospital. A volunteer British Airways flight and cabin crew must also be found, but even with all the enthusiastic voluntary support, Dreamflight still needs more than £700,000 a year to succeed.

While on holiday the children enjoy a fun-packed itinerary visiting all the major theme parks of Disney, Sea World and Universal. They are split into 12 regional groups of 16 children

to wish the children well. The following morning the Regimental Band of the Royal Welsh Regiment plays the groups up and onto our very own 747. It doesn't take long for the children to realise that they are not the 'odd ones out'. They see children around them who have also suffered, gaining perspective and experiences they never thought possible. The freedom and independence they achieve while away is an amazing development for these children.

In 2009, the video team was able to send an extra member on the trip, with the brief to produce material for a *Story of Dreamflight*, a short

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each – eight girls, eight boys, aged between 8 and 14, with team names such as Flintstones (Glasgow area) and Shrek (Cardiff). Ideally, the film crew comprises seven cameramen, the two newest covering just one group apiece, while the other five volunteers take on two groups each. It is quite a commitment for the team members who must shoot and edit their own material. The Dreamflight video project is managed by John Cavanagh, an airline pilot, who organises the film crew and acts as official stills photographer for the holiday.

The team produces 12 individual 90-minute DVDs, so that after the trip each group of children will receive their own dedicated 'movie', enabling them to relive their experiences and share them with their family and friends.

Our filming starts on the Saturday when all the youngsters assemble at the Heathrow Renaissance Hotel. That evening we have a fantastic party, with many celebrities attending

promotional documentary film that will give glimpses into the charity's life-changing aims. This extra material will also be available for specialised fundraising promotional videos throughout the forthcoming year and as B-roll footage for any broadcasters interested in coverage of the charity.

### Equipment choice

Without owning the basic camera equipment it would be difficult to achieve what is necessary. A few years ago the charity purchased six Sony PD170 miniDV cameras. This choice of a good-quality robust 'prosumer' camcorder system suited the technical quality necessary for the way in which the end results are shown. This was the first time the trip had been filmed in widescreen. The cameras are more than capable of a widescreen image, either by switching in their menu or by cropping the 4:3 images in post-production. It might not be broadcast standard but for what we offer the



Photos by JOHN CAVANAGH

kids, this is an acceptable compromise of quality.

John Tye was the designated cameraman for the additional filming. Originally the *Story* material was to have been shot with a Sony DSR-450, but after difficulties obtaining the relevant extra permissions in time from the theme parks, the smaller Sony Z7 camera was a clear winner to accomplish the filming.

Broadcast Services Ltd kindly loaned us a Z7 (plus a spare) for the trip. John is a keen videographer who, through other cameramen in the project, has been on many attachments to professional shoots; however, he

Many of them were on hand to see this year's children off from Heathrow at their VIP departure.

On arrival at Orlando we were met by the acclaimed golfer Ian Poulter who has become one of the charity's patrons. The Golf Channel was making a short item on Ian and his work with Dreamflight, and its cameraman Greig Smith (based in Orlando) captured the landing for us. Greig was an original Dreamflight cameraman who married one of the American helpers and moved to the United States.

Once in Orlando the children were whisked off in a fleet of coaches and given an American-style presidential

in a taxi alone, with the driver frequently glancing nervously in his rear view mirror!

The theme parks of Orlando form an amazing backdrop for filming and every year the cameramen produce excellent thought-provoking results. Most of the filming team come from a multi-skilled television background – some produce and direct, some are cameramen, some edit, some are from sound, yet others are from outside the broadcast industry altogether. Whatever their background or speciality, all work together, learning and sharing experience.

### Changing techniques

How do you film on a swirling raft as it plummets down the white-water ride at Disney's Blizzard Beach? Most of the crew had previously used ewa-marine bags on their PD170s but this is a cumbersome and hazardous way of working on very wet rides and in crowded swimming pools. The new solution on this trip was to use underwater stills cameras capable of shooting video. Between us the group used Olympus 720 and 770s plus a Lumix Panasonic TS1 to capture these thrilling adventures. Once dropped on to the timeline and rendered, the slight drop in quality is well worth the magic of the motion.

I have been involved with Dreamflight since 1996, when I was originally asked to film that year's trip for a BBC insert into the Sunday morning show, *11th Hour*. The following year the charity asked me to put together a team to make a

film about the holiday for the children. To start with our remit was to see all the children at least once and to document what they had achieved by making a (VHS) video diary for all 192 children. I travelled out as part of a four-man BetaSP crew (cameraman, sound recordist/editor, PA/camera assistant and producer/director).

In subsequent years I have occasionally returned to help chronicle Dreamflight's adventures, in latter years as one of the 'self-shooters'. It is interesting to see how the use of lightweight technology has changed the way we achieve making the video diaries, even though the story-telling technique is the same. By being

director, producer, cameraman, soundman and editor all rolled into one, the story is completely yours to tell. You choose the narrative and decide the shooting and editing style, controlling the whole workflow. Smaller cameras allow intimate access to your subject matter; the children are more relaxed and magic moments are more frequently captured. A challenge of this self-shooting programme, though, is to maintain your physical and mental strength as these are exhausting circumstances. Dehydration, lack of sleep and sun exposure are all to be avoided.

Dreamflight is a mammoth organisational task and the costs of mounting the yearly trips are considerable (more than £3,500 per child). Fundraising is the life-blood of Dreamflight, and with the increasing need to attract more corporate sponsorship, to ensure a long-term

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stable financial footing, the use of video in encouraging donations is essential.

The commitment for those filming begins around Easter time, with John Cavanagh seeking volunteers for that October's trip. By late summer the cameramen have been finalised and the team allocated their groups. Early involvement with the groups is essential, with many regional groups holding get-togethers by early September. This gives the cameraman a chance to integrate, getting to know their children and making filming them easier. Just before the trip, there is a training day at Heathrow, where all the adults involved assemble to go through the procedures that will make the holiday safe and a great success. October soon comes around and the ten-day trip is upon us.

The arrival back at Heathrow comes all too soon and emotional family reunions signal the end of the children's holiday ... but for the crew it is far from over. The vast editing task in preparing the DVDs is just about to begin. Each cameraman has to edit their own material in their spare time, trying to get the finished product to the children in their group/s by early in the New Year. Self-editing is essential, as a third-party editor might cut something out because it is photographically less than perfect, while the cameraman who shot it knows that it is, for example, the first time that child has ever walked alone unaided. For the video team, a promise is a promise (especially when made to kids) and delivery dates are rarely not met.

Technically the equipment lasted well on this trip, even though it was at times put through challenges 'Mr Sony' perhaps never envisaged! Dreamflight has owned its fleet of PD170s for four years now and we will soon need to think about upgrading to solid-state, widescreen mini camcorders. Of course if there are any sponsors out there reading this who can help, we would welcome that call!

### Get involved

If anyone reading this article is interested in helping the video project, do drop the charity an email via [www.dreamflight.org](http://www.dreamflight.org). You do not need to be a professional cameraman and multi-skilling abilities are particularly appropriate. Of course, this raises the old GTC question, 'When is a cameraman a cameraman?' Is it only when filming for broadcast, or can this be judged on quality of work and ability to produce results? Last year, professional cameraman Jon Boast was nominated for a GTC award for his work on Dreamflight, but this was rejected on constitutional grounds. Perhaps in the future the Guild will consider discretionary non-broadcast awards.

As the charity heads towards its 25th anniversary, it is obvious that it succeeds in large part because of the quality of its volunteers. Time is the most precious commodity for us all, so why do we do it, why do people volunteer?

People choose to give for many reasons – some altruistic, some personal, but always for a purpose.

Some are looking for a place where they can use skills and talents honed in the workplace. Volunteering should be fun and you should really enjoy what you do, even if the project is serious and meaningful. For many, the concept of 'giving back' is in the forefront of their mind; remember, compassion and caring are essential for good volunteering.

For me, personally, the highlight of the trip was filming the children swimming with dolphins at Discovery Cove. To watch their sheer enjoyment, you would never know that these kids are anything other than healthy. Dreamflight really has been a life-changing experience, not just for the children, but for me as well. I would certainly recommend any adult in the broadcast industry to consider volunteering as a film-maker or indeed as a child escort.

### Kit List

- Sony DSR PD170 miniDV camcorders
- Sony HVR-Z7
- Sony DSR-450
- Olympus 720 and 770
- Lumix Panasonic TS1
- Flip Ultra widescreen HD mini camcorder
- Manfrotto monopods and tripods

Broadcast Services Ltd:  
[www.broadcast-services.co.uk](http://www.broadcast-services.co.uk)

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[www.hammerheadtv.com](http://www.hammerheadtv.com)



### Fact File

Graeme McAlpine is an OB, studio and PSC lighting cameraman. Joined London Weekend Television 1977, freelance since 1991. GTC Certificate of Excellence for work on *Birding with Bill Oddie*. Website: [www.mcalpine.tv](http://www.mcalpine.tv)

See more about Dreamflight at: [www.dreamflight.org](http://www.dreamflight.org)

"the intimacy of lightweight filming helps capture and portray the emotion and excitement of the whole Dreamflight experience"

normally 'captains' long-haul jets for British Airways. As John says, "I always dreamed of being a professional film-maker and Dreamflight has given me the opportunity to exercise my skills as a cameraman."

### Turning point

*The Paralympians Story* is another long-term project the group is filming. This is about past Dreamflight children who have gone on to achieve amazing things in their challenging lives. A remarkable seven of the medal-winning Paralympians returning from Beijing were former Dreamflight children, citing the trip as an inspirational turning point for them.

cavalcade to their hotel, with police outriders shutting down the interstate along the way. This magnificent sight was captured on tape from a Robinson R44 helicopter from Fly High Helicopter Tours, whose flying time had been donated by Barrie Wheatley, Vice President of IPG Realty, a real estate business based outside Orlando. Jon Boast (Dreamflight's lead cameraman) filmed the procession from the air with a DSR-450 lent by Hammerhead TV Ltd. Jon's only problem was that the children had already painted his fingernails in various outrageous colours (an old Dreamflight tradition), which led to a bizarre ride back from the helipad

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