

## UC San Diego Physician Defies Gravity with Four Kids Who Spend Their Lives in Wheelchairs

November 13, 2008

Jackie Carr

Erik Viirre, M.D., Ph.D., a University of California, San Diego School of Medicine physician who specializes in diseases of the inner ear, recently completed his fifth weightless flight with Zero Gravity Corporation. Aboard the same plane were four paraplegic children who left their wheelchairs on earth as they floated free in a zero-gravity environment.

"It was exhilarating and deeply gratifying," said Viirre, Adjunct Associate Professor of Otolaryngology and Cognitive Science at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. "Weightlessness can be enjoyed by anyone, even children. For these brave kids, it was a rare opportunity to experience the world without their wheelchairs. One child said she got to stand up for the first time. Hearing that, as a physician, truly lifts the heart."

The four pioneering children ranged in age from 11-12 years old and hailed from Florida, Connecticut, Tennessee, and Arkansas. Together they completed sixteen periods of weightlessness with Zero-G, a U.S. company offering FAA-approved weightless flights for the general public.

"I took my daughter Rosanna on one of these flights earlier this year. She had a blast and I knew these children would too," said Viirre.

Viirre, chief medical officer for the flight, says that by controlling what a person eats before the flight, maintaining a cool ventilated cabin, prescribing a tested combination of oral medications, and timing the orientation of the body throughout the flight, more than 98% of passengers experience no nausea.

The flight adventure was caught on camera by Nickelodeon Television.

"A friend of mine who has used a wheelchair for many years reminded me that the problem is not the chair -- it's gravity. So we thought it might be fun to go on an adventure where we could leave gravity behind," said Linda Ellerbee, Emmy Award-winning journalist with Nick News.

In May of 2007, Viirre flew with Stephen Hawking, one of the world's most renowned physicists and cosmologists. Viirre, who also serves on the board of the San Diego Air and Space Museum, believes that the experience of weightlessness should be available to science teachers. He is currently involved in an initiative to help hundreds of school teachers access zero gravity flights at no cost.

The *Nick News with Linda Ellerbee: The View From My Chair*, premieres on Sunday, Nov. 16, at 9:00 p.m. (ET/PT) on Nickelodeon.

Media Contact: Jackie Carr, 619-543-6163

