

A trip of a



LIFE TIME



STORY BY NIKI DE SOTO



All-American Cheerleader Lauren Hargess Thayer, Mo., High School Bobcat Cheerleader

Traveling to another country after being named an all-American cheerleader is an exciting adventure, unless of course your plane is scheduled to leave on December 26, 2009 - the day after the underwear bomber tried to blow up a flight landing in Detroit.

That's what happened to Thayer Bobcat Cheerleader Lauren Hargess last December. Lauren was one of 30 girls chosen out of 400 at the Universal Cheerleading Association's cheer camp last summer to participate in the 2010 New Year's Day parade in downtown London.

"Security at the St. Louis airport was on high alert after the bombing attempt," said Lauren. "So we ended up leaving on Sunday instead; we lost a whole day."

And what did her mom, Laurie Hargess, think about all of this?

"We were nervous, but it's a once in a lifetime opportunity, a real chance to see that there's more out there in the world, not just small town USA, and the community came through with donations to help get her there," said Laurie. "The trip was \$2,765.00 for each cheerleader, and without the support of the Thayer community, we wouldn't have been able to get her there. One of the teachers made some quilts and donated them for an auction, and she was just as excited as Lauren was."

"It meant so much to me, that my community would help me so much for this opportunity," said Lauren.

Joining Lauren for the trip was her sponsor and former gymnastics coach Regina Stevens, who runs Gina's Gymnastics in Thayer.

"She used to be my old cheer coach and she taught me gymnastics," said Lauren.

Together, the two met up with the hundreds of other cheerleaders from across the country who were traveling to London to perform in the parade. Once they reached England, they split into two

groups, and spent time rehearsing, sight seeing and enjoying the local food.

"It was a really great experience. We got to go to Windsor castle, and got to see the guards, and Queen Mary's dollhouse. We also went to see St. Paul's cathedral and got to go on the London Eye, which is this big ferris wheel, and it never stops moving, so you kind of have to run on and off of it. It was amazing."

Lauren's group also got to see the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London, Covent Garden, the British Museum and the Hard Rock Cafe, along with enjoying a disco cruise on the Thames.

Lauren and Regina were the only Missourians to make the trip, but that didn't deter her from making friends. "At the beginning I was the only one going on my squad, but I met a lot of new friends and had a really great time, and we talk on the internet all the



The Hargess family at the St. Louis Airport waiting for the flight that would take Lauren to England and an adventure of a lifetime. At right, Lauren at London Bridge.





time.”

Lauren spent a week in England, and the weather is definitely what you might expect for a place known for its fog. “It rained like every day besides parade day. Luckily the sun was out for the parade. By the time we got done, we were sweating. You actually had to run to keep up, because we would stop to dance, and then we’d have to get caught up.”

You can actually see the squad in action on YouTube by searching for UCA London New Year’s parade. Lauren said the reaction of most Londoners to the influx of American teenagers was pretty typical. “They could be kind of rude to you, but they loved us in our uniforms. I loved their accents too! We were trying to talk like them, and they were like, ‘Oh my.’”

By the end of their week long stay, Lauren and Regina were ready to head for home. “I think everybody was ready to come home,” said Lauren. “There, you were going all the time, but here, things are more simple. I brought back key chains and picture frames and t-shirts and a London bear for my friends and family. I was kind of spatially challenged in my suitcase, as it had to be under 50 pounds, so I bought little things.”

Up next for Lauren is more cheerleading and more sports, as she is on the dance team, Basketball and Volleyball teams at Thayer High School, along with cheering for the Football team come fall - this is one busy young lady.

“She does all of that and she keeps her grades up,” said Laurie. “She’s a great kid and she works hard. She makes us very proud.”



Lauren’s sponsor on the trip was her former gymnastics coach Regina Stevens who owns and operates Gina’s Gymnastics in Thayer.