Air show ‘is sick,’ in a good way

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Dwayne, Renne and Patrice Hands have never flown in a plane before.

But on Saturday, the three young people were able to imagine themselves up there in the blue sky over Lake Michigan doing rolls, loops, stalls and skydives with the best stunt pilots and parachutists in the world.

“The best was when the people jumped out of the plane,” Renne, 11, said. “The U.S. Army’s Golden Knights parachute team. ‘I wanted to do that all my life.’”

Brother Dwayne, 16, craned his neck from his perch on a sand dune to catch up to a U.S. Air Force’s F-16 Falcon as it shot out over the dunes and above the lake at 650 mph. Sister Patrice, 10, kept repeating “awesome” over and over and also voted for the Golden Knights as her favorite act.

“But I’d feel scared to be in an airplane right now,” she said.

The three were at the Gary South Shore Air Show along with foster mom Betty Penderson as VIP guests of the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, which produces the air show in cooperation with the Gary Jet Center and the city of Gary.

The South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority wanted to reward Penderson and the children for their efforts at forming a stronger family with the help of the Indiana Parenting Institute, said convention and visitors authority CEO Speros Batistatos.

“We just want to show families when they work hard and make good decisions they will be rewarded,” Batistatos said.

The Indiana Parenting Institute identified Penderson and her foster children as deserving of the reward because they came forward and sought the help the institute can give, institute founder Laura Smith-Wynn said. The same is true of Katherine Simmons and the grandchildren she is raising, who will be VIP guests at the air show today.

Batistatos said he expected 350,000 people at the air show both Saturday and today. A “perfect unstorm” of temperatures in the 80s, a slight breeze and the return of the U.S. Air Force’s Thunderbirds this year had the tourism chief brimming with confidence as Saturday’s show opened at noon.

Heavy attendance helps the convention and visitors authority defray the $450,000 cost of the show through parking and vendor fees. The show itself is free.

This year’s air show opened with a new act, AeroShell, and an old standby, the U.S. Army Golden Knights Parachute Team. Also flying early in the show was the red Lucas Oil Pitts biplane, which performed a series of spinning free falls that the plane only pulled out of at the last second to streak over the lake’s surface as the crowd on the Marquette Park beach gasped.

Michael Steven Shell, 11, of Merrillville, gave an early vote for the Lucas Oil Pitts act as best of show “because it’s sick.”

“He’s just doing a whole bunch of life-threatening tricks,” chimed in brother Derel Shell, 12.

The U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds usually make an every-other-year appearance at the air show. This year was the year with the powerful display of the U.S. Air Force’s F-16 fighting might scheduled for 4 p.m.