

# Boynton Beach employees build 'magic' wheelchair for young girl

Emma Pietrafesa, who was born with a developmental disorder, received a 'magic' purple wheelchair, built just for her by two Boynton Beach city employees.

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**F**or most girls, getting around in a purple Camaro as their first car is only a dream. For Emma Pietrafesa, who was born with a developmental disorder, it was a reality in the form of a “magic” purple wheelchair, built especially for her by two Boynton Beach city employees.

Emma, 10, seemed unable to contain her excitement Friday as Coral Springs firefighters and Mayor Steven Grant unveiled the wheelchair at the Magic Wheels and Special Deals event in Boynton Beach.

Her mother, Karen Pietrafesa, held her and her 12-year-old brother, Anthony, who has autism, keeping a reassuring hand on Emma’s shoulder as she saw her wheelchair for the first time.

Boynton Beach project manager Kevin Ramsey and police officer Wilmer Rodriguez, who spent more than 100 hours building the wheelchair, saw the result of their effort.

“A lot of love” was poured into the project, Rodriguez said.

When Ramsey had met Emma in the past, her demeanor had been somewhat subdued, he said.

“There’s definitely some fire in her right now,” he said Friday as she sat in the wheelchair, grinning ear to ear.

Saturday morning, she will kick off the Barrier Free 5K Run, Walk and Roll as the honorary starter in her new wheelchair, modeled to look like her father’s prized possession, a 2010 fire-engine red Camaro. The race will start at the Congress Avenue Barrier Free Park, 3111 S. Congress Ave., which was designed to accommodate individuals of all ages with disabilities.

A portion of the race registration fees will be used to expand the park.

The park presents as few barriers as possible, such as grass transition points between a play area, said parks director Wally Majors. The park also features ramps onto play areas, elements that make sounds and movements to provide auditory and sensory stimulation and elements that provide uneven surfaces, such as hills, for children on the autism spectrum who may have trouble feeling balanced, he said.

People of all ages and abilities can enjoy the park, he said.

“We did the best we could to make it as accessible as possible for people of every ability level,” he said.

It will be a welcome respite for the family after almost three months without Emma’s father, Paul Pietrafesa. The Coral Springs firefighter died the day before Thanksgiving last year after a long battle with pancreatic cancer.

“

It's like having him there, like a piece of him is there.

— Karen Pietrafesa

Friday’s event and Saturday’s race are nice distractions for the whole family, she said, including her other three children.

“It’s given us some smiles, and something positive to look forward to,” she said.

Emma, who was born with Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, a genetic disorder that presents a range of physical, cognitive and medical challenges, misses her father a lot, Pietrafesa said.

Although Emma can't speak or walk, Pietrafesa said her daughter lets her know what she's feeling in other ways.

Emma gets around the house using a scooter to move across the floor, she said. She often goes into the room where her father used to stay in his hospice bed, then comes back to his favorite spot on the couch where he used to sit, she said.

"She looks around like she's looking for him," she said. "She goes between those two spots and can't figure out why he's not around. She doesn't have any idea that he's not coming back."

Emma has the learning capacity of a 2-year-old, her mother said. She understands commands and when someone wants her to do something, she said, but doesn't have the ability to fully comprehend death.

The custom wheelchair will match Emma's feisty personality perfectly, Pietrafesa said. The "total diva" wore a pink tutu and matching cowboy boots at Friday's event.

Purple is the color that represents both Cornelia de Lange Syndrome and pancreatic cancer. Coral Springs firefighters placed a decal of Emma's father's signature on the back of her Camaro, over a license plate decal bearing her name.

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