

Wheelchair Magic...

Child's James Bond spy car takes shape in Tualatin

BY REID IFORD, TUALATIN LIFE

It is hard to imagine childhood spent confined to a wheelchair. Think of all the activities - big and small - children take for granted which would be denied. Even something as simple as running through the grass barefoot on a spring day would be beyond the realm of hope.



Jesse here in Tualatin, four staff members of RRC Companies, a leader in renewable energy - solar and wind development - decided they wanted to do something especial for an Oregon child in a wheelchair.

This came about when they heard of the Oregon nonprofit Magic Wheelchair, formed to turn children's wheelchairs into something magical and attention getting, by creating

add-on costumes that fit over the chairs. These are used for Halloween, birthdays, parades, and whenever the child likes.

"We all have a desire to see children succeed," explains Logan Russell, electrical design engineer at RRC and team leader for the costume build, "and because we are making this for a child with disabilities, it is especially rewarding to provide them an opportunity they would not otherwise have, with something unique built just for them.

"Our company encourages and supports us to do volunteer work, especially in our own community. Volunteering with Magic Wheelchair provides a great way for us to help children using our skills in electrical engineering, and also to learn," Logan adds.

Jesse, 12, idolizes his father, and asked the Tualatin Build Team for a Smart Car just like dad's. But Jesse didn't want just any old Smart Car. Oh no. He wanted a super spy car.

"We have a unique opportunity," says Russell. "We are making a Smart Car into a James Bond styled vehicle with all kinds of cool electrical components. There are Nerf guns that pop out of the headlights, even a working radio."

Jesse will get to "drive" his spy car when it is unveiled February 17 at WizardWorld Comic Con in the Portland Convention Center. Logan, along with his teammates from RCC Companies, Nicole Wehner, John Moffit and Tanya Johnston (who first told her co-workers about Magic Wheelchair), have a budget of \$1,500 to build the costume, and are hard at work to get it done by the deadline.

The costumes must be lightweight and, despite their size, allow the child to easily maneuver their wheelchair with the costume attached.

None of this would be possible without the \$1,500 which is paying construction costs, and this came from Sharky's Woodfired Mexican Grill on Nyberg Street. Sharky's, which opened one year ago, specializes in healthy, locally sourced food. Sharky's has made a big impact on the community in the last year, repeatedly hosting fundraising events to benefit worthy causes in Tualatin. When they learned of the Magic Wheelchair project they quickly stepped in to raise the money to make it happen.

Magic Wheelchair grew from the desire of one Oregon man to do something special for his children with muscular dystrophy. Ryan Weimer has two sons and a daughter with MD. Sadly, one child passed away. Ryan was tired of seeing his first child Keaton miss out on so much because he was confined to a wheelchair, so one Halloween he got the idea of incorporating his son Keaton's wheelchair into the child's Halloween costume.

"Keaton got his powered wheelchair when he was three," explains Ryan. "He wanted to be a pirate for Halloween, and I thought we could build a pirate ship around his wheelchair, which is a part of him." It took off from there, with his children's costumes becoming more and more

elaborate. Ryan quickly observed that the costume did far more for his children than to just allow them to participate in activities like Halloween.

"That decorated wheelchair broke down barriers," Ryan says. "We see that anytime we go out. Kids especially don't know how to approach a child with a disability. Suddenly they saw him, not the disability. I cried, and I wanted to offer this to other families who need to experience this for their own children.

"I'm a person of faith, and that's what you need to do when you discover something wonderful. Share with others," Ryan explains.

"The first year we build eight chairs for children in Oregon, with volunteers, who we call build teams, in Oregon, Washington, and California. Even some high school kids in Georgia got involved. That was in 2015. In 2016 we built 25 wheelchair costumes. It was a lot of work, but it is a great feeling. With a wheelchair costume, the child feels included, instead of excluded. They become superstars and the center of attention," Ryan says.

Magic Wheelchair has garnered national attention, with Ryan appearing on The Meredith Vieira Show and more and more news agencies picking up the story. Ryan said he would like to see every child experience the joy of having their wheelchair turned into something magical.

To learn more about Magic Wheelchair, get involved as a builder, or donate, please visit Magicwheelchair.org.



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