

## Brother delivers holiday surprise

John Byrne's fundraising bike ride allows purchase of disabled-access vehicle for sister

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A Nipomo firefighter whose cross-country fundraising effort raised national attention last fall surprised his sister Christmas morning with a gift purchased by thousands of donors — a wheelchair-adapted car.

“I can’t believe so many people made this possible, and now it’s here,” said John Byrne, an engineer at Cal Fire Station 20 in Nipomo.

With the support of fire associations across the nation, Byrne’s trek from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Brooklyn Bridge raised money for a specialized vehicle that would provide more autonomy for his sister, Lauren Byrne of Newark, Calif.

Lauren was 15 years old when she injured her spine and nearly drowned after jumping into a pool. Now in a wheelchair and with limited mobility in her arms, she continues to inspire her brother and others as she attends college, plays wheelchair rugby and works toward her dream of becoming a teacher.

Family, friends and firefighters promoted the ride and organized special events along the way, including a spaghetti feed in Nipomo on Sept. 7 and another in Byrne’s hometown of Fremont the following evening.

Byrne began his fundraising bike ride Sept. 9 at the Golden Gate Bridge. On Oct. 14, more than 3,000 sometimes mountainous, windy, and often grueling miles later, he hoisted his bike up to his shoulder to take the steps of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Byrne and their mother, Judy Byrne, convinced Lauren that this week’s visit to Nipomo was simply to share the holiday with her firefighter brother.

“I’ve worked the last few holidays and haven’t been able to spend that time with my family. We told Lauren it would mean a lot to me if we could have Christmas at my house,” John said.

She couldn’t have known that the shiny black 2011 Honda Element would be waiting behind the roll-up doors at Cal Fire Station 20, with a big purple bow on the hood.

“I was overwhelmed, astounded, ecstatic! I didn’t expect so many people,” Lauren said, after being greeted by about 25 friends, firefighters and EMTs.

She had been told her vehicle delivery was delayed, and that two days after Christmas her family would take her to Los Angeles to try out some vehicles.

“We were in touch with Adaptive Driving Systems in San Luis Obispo a lot during the ride, but we were looking at our options. Without Lauren knowing, we went ahead and bought the vehicle through them,” John said.

A hydraulic ramp on the passenger’s side of the vehicle will give Lauren easy access through the double-wide door in either her electric or sport chair. She’ll then transfer herself to the driver’s seat and take the specially adapted wheel, which allows her to drive. Two back seats provide for passengers, or they can be flipped down to provide her more storage space.

“It’s a really good vehicle for her. It’s perfect. It’s what she wanted. We just didn’t tell her it was available,” Byrne said.

Through donations made to the SLO County Benevolent Firefighters Association, Byrne was able to hand over a check for \$51,885 for the vehicle. There’s another \$7,000 in the bank.

“We’re waiting to find out what kind of tax penalties there may be. We may use some of that for driving lessons and vehicle-associated costs. Whatever’s left over we’ll leave in the benevolent fund to help someone else,” Byrne said.

Meanwhile, Lauren has her driving permit. The Byrnes were able to set her up with some driving lessons while she’s in the area, beginning today.

“It’s crazy to me how difficult it is to get a vehicle for her lessons,” John said.

Lauren signed up for lessons in northern California only to discover the instructor’s vehicle didn’t have the right steering wheel for her.

“I think being more independent is going to change a lot of things for Lauren,” John said.

For now, she talks about wanting to drive the route her brother pedaled in her honor, but he’s pushing her to complete her degree.

“That will be the real end of the ride,” he said.

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