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Go Francisco Go! | WHS students modify rides for kids with special needs

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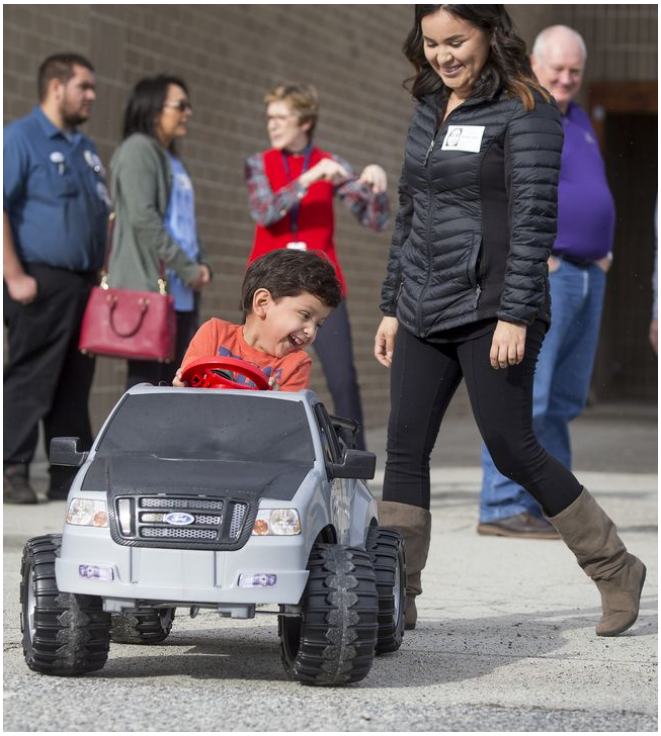
Education



World photo/Don Seabrook
Francisco Garibay, 3, tries out his new truck that was fitted to him with hand controls by Wenatchee High School teacher Doug Merrill's class. Garibay's mother Maribel walks alongside him at the school on Friday. Francisco has Spina bifida and can't walk.

WENATCHEE – The big green button on the steering wheel means “go.”

Three-year-old Francisco Garibay didn’t have to be told twice, though he looked back at his mom a couple times, just in case.

He toured the parking lot, the hill and the hallway in his newly retrofitted electric ride-on truck that he can control entirely with his hands.

Spina bifida left him without the use of his legs, but his arms are strong.

He had no trouble pushing the button on the steering wheel and reaching the switch that puts the tricked-out silver and black truck in reverse when he ends up in a tight spot.

The speed bump presented no problem.

“Where are you going?” his mom called.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Chase me!”

When the battery used for his Oct. 26 test drive ran out of juice, the students in Doug Merrill's Wenatchee High School auto-cad class quickly swapped it out. Francisco was off again.

"I love it," he said.

That was the plan.

Francisco's truck is the first of 20 vehicles Merrill's students will be modifying for children with mobility issues in an effort to encourage them to explore their world, play with their peers and develop new skills.

"This is part of a big movement called GoBabyGo!" said Merrill, who heard about the program at a conference last spring. "It allows them to discover things they weren't able to before, when they're depending on people to push them around or carry them. It makes their brains start popping and firing in all sorts of new directions."

Cole Galloway, a physical therapy professor at the University of Delaware, started the program in 2012. He had been working with another department on designing high-tech robots that could help young children with mobility issues explore their world independently. The project was expensive, though, making it out-of-reach for most families. He shifted gears when he walked into a toy store and saw battery-operated ride-on cars, realizing they could be modified to the task for a lot less money. The program took off from there, with schools, communities and companies nationwide pitching in to purchase and modify the cars.

In addition to helping the young children, Merrill saw potential for his mechanically inclined high school engineering students to get hands-on experience with everything from problem solving skills required to figure out how to adapt the cars to fit the individual needs of the students to the wrench-turning and wiring skills needed to make the changes.

He brought the idea back to Anne Schneider, the district's physical therapist, who works with preschool children with special needs.

"I was right on board," she said.

She got so excited, she bought Francisco's car herself this summer to get the program jump-started.

Since then, Merrill applied for and received a $10,000 state grant to buy 20 of the cars, along with the tools and parts needed to make the modifications. His classroom looks like mini-multi-story parking garage with everything from sports cars in flashy colors to dune buggies, trucks, Jeeps and even a tractor.

The car sizes make them most suitable for children in preschool, kindergarten and the lower elementary school grades. The class is working on plans to modify a vehicle for a student in middle school, Merrill said.

Camila Castaneda is next in line. The 3-and-a-half-year-old has right-side weakness, so the WHS students will have to figure out adaptations that will allow her to control the car with her left hand or foot, but also encourage her to use her right arm, to strengthen it.

Her parents, Juan Castaneda and Teresa Gamarena, were at the high school last week to see Francisco's test drive.

"This is amazing," Gamarena said. "I'm just wowed by how independent it makes him. We're so used to being in control of where they're going to go. Seeing his face is amazing. He can go wherever he wants."

They later picked out a pink sports car for Camila's new ride.

Schneider said it can be difficult for the parents to realize all the implications at first.

"This opens a whole new world for Francisco. He can now participate when other kids are riding their trikes around the track. It will make an impact on his learning," she said.

Merrill said he is seeing some unexpected benefits for the 16 or so engineering students who have worked on the project.

"I thought the big draw for the class was the chance to build the cars, do the electrical and mechanical work. But the empathy piece has really grown," he said. "They are thinking about how it will make the kids feel. They are so excited to help."

His students spent 12 to 15 school days working on Francisco's truck since the project got going the second week of school.

"I think it's cool," WHS senior Jacob Christensen said. "He doesn't have the ability to play on the playground like all the other kids. This program gives him the opportunity to have some fun for himself."

Merrill is making presentations at two conferences this month – one statewide and one regional – encouraging other school districts to pick up the program.

"We've only scratched the surface with what this program can do," he said. "It's not a high-tech, extremely difficult kind of thing. And there are so many kids out there who would be perfect candidates for this. We need to get the word out."

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