

# The Bradford Era

Kate Day Sager

## Variety gifts life-changing devices to local children

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Jake Meister, center, uses a new voice communication device to tell his Bradford Owls wrestling teammates standing behind him that they are his friends after receiving the item from “Variety” the children’s charity Monday at the Intermediate Unit 9 in Smethport. Also shown are Meister’s mother, Mary Jo Corignani, left, Variety CEO Charles LaVallee, and teammates, from left, Derek Sunafrank, Colby Keane and Dillon Keane.

Era photo by Kate Day Sager

Beatrice MacDonald could barely contain her excitement and danced at the front of the room Monday when the time came for her to receive her brand new Rifton adaptive bike from representatives with “Variety” the children’s charity who visited the Intermediate Unit 9 in Smethport.

Beatrice was one of several children with disabilities who received the adaptive bikes as well as Kid Kart Mighty Lite adaptive strollers and iPad communication devices through the program.



Beatrice MacDonald and her dad, Sam, of Ridgway, both enjoy the new adaptive bike provided to Beatrice and several children, along with strollers and communication devices, from the "Variety" organization Monday at the Intermediate Unit 9 in Smethport.

Era photo by Kate Day Sager

Charles LaVallee, CEO of Variety, said the non-profit program is based in Pittsburgh and provides children with disabilities unique programs, experiences and equipment to give them opportunities "to live life to the fullest and not be left out, left behind or excluded."

He said the organization, which kicked off its programs in 2012, has grown from 10 to 56 counties and is "closing in on \$4.5 million in adaptable equipment" given to children with disabilities.

"But it doesn't happen without people in this room and (those) who spread the word," LaVallee told a room full of parents and children from the IU9 area.

LaVallee said the organization, which operates on donations, strives to provide equipment to children who may have to share bikes and devices at their schools during the day and then can't take them home at night.

LaVallee said he knows of a child who was never able to visit the inside of a McDonald's Restaurant because his mother had too much difficulty loading and unloading his larger, heavier stroller. With the new adaptive stroller, weighing in at just 29 pounds, the child was able to visit the inside of the restaurant for the first time.

A mother who spoke about her son receiving an adaptive stroller and communication device was Kim Garner of the St. Marys area. She said the items will help her little boy, Jace Buentello, at home and school.

"It's hard even at school, because if something happens he can't tell me," Garner said of her son.

Another woman wept as she told LaVallee how happy her daughter, who turns 5 today, is to receive an adaptive bike after watching other children, including her sister, ride and have fun.

“She is so excited about this and has been talking about it for weeks because she can’t ride a bike on her own,” the woman said through tears. “I can’t even put into words how happy this makes us.”

Youngsters who received communication devices included Jake Meister of Bradford, who was at gathering with his mother, Mary Jo Corignani, and three teammates from the Bradford Owls wrestling team. Meister, 16, who is diagnosed with autism and nonverbal cerebral palsy, gained national and international fame this winter when a video of him wrestling and winning against a teammate at Bradford Area High School was shown on newscasts and sports channels.

“This gives him normalcy, he can be in a setting and communicate with his friends,” Corignani said of her son’s new iPad device which voices words he types or selects on the screen.

Meister demonstrated his communicative skills when he then wrote, “I love wrestling. My teammates are my friends.”