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## Families receive devices

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*Shelly Williams, left, and Dawn Palm, led efforts among fellow TIU workers to raised \$3,669 for Variety the Children's Charity effort was dedicated to the memory of Amanda Boor, TIU employee. Boor's husband, Spencer, center, participated in Wednesday's check presentation. Photo by REBECCA BERDAR*

Speaking to a group of local families behind the scenes at the Tuscarora Intermediate Unit's 46<sup>th</sup> annual convention Wednesday, Charlie LaVallee pointed out that often times life's big moments are "the little things" — words and motions — that connect children and their loved ones.

The families, each caring for special needs children, soon after showed the awaiting crowd of educators and school board members how their new adaptive strollers and communication devices put "the little things" — like an impromptu stop at a favorite restaurant or everyday conversation between parent and child within easier reach thanks to LaVallee and his partners. Because of issues with mobility or speech, LaVallee said for

some families a simple outing that most would take for granted are within reach only after clearing hurdles with transportation and communication.

“The little things are the big things — like going out for ice cream,” he said.

As convention speaker, LaVallee, executive director and CEO of Variety the Children’s Charity, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit foundation, shared information about Variety’s three adaptive equipment programs — My Bike, My Stroller and My Voice — which are available to children age 3 to 21 in 56 counties throughout Pennsylvania and into West Virginia.

A total of 11 families within the TIU’s territory are receiving equipment from Variety. Eight of those families were able to attend the convention to accept the equipment in person.

The young recipients include Huntingdon County residents Alexander and Isabelle Boyd, Zaiden Sollers, Evan Berrier and Cree Wilson. The Boyd siblings and Sollers received strollers while Berrier and Wilson were given communication devices. Another Huntingdon County child received a communication device but his family asked to remain anonymous.

Recipients also include three Mifflin County residents —Markis Mountz, Hannah Ripple and Madalyn Williams who all received communication devices — and two from Fulton County, James McFadden who accepted a stroller and Dustin Barnhart who was given an adaptive bike.

TIU staff made the families aware of the Variety program and helped them complete application papers.

Anita Young of Huntingdon said she and her husband, Matt, were reluctant when daughter Mia’s speech pathologist recommended she try out a communication device. Young said they feared Mia, who is non-verbal, would become too dependent on the device.

Instead, the device provided the Youngs with new insight into their daughters’ abilities.

“One day, out of nowhere, she decided to spell her full name,” Young said. “We had no idea she even knew her name.”

Since receiving the device from Variety in January, Mia, age 4, is starting to speak. Her mom said her vocabulary is 20 words and growing and noted the device has helped Mia develop a love of music by giving her a voice to command Alexa to cue her favorite songs. LaVallee said while some schools are able to provide access to such devices for students in need, limited resources often means students have to share a device or can only use the device during school hours.

“It’s like at the end of the day, you have to turn your voice off,” he said, adding that on multiple occasions, he’s witnessed parents hear their child talk for the first time using the devices provided by Variety.

The Boyd family of McConnellstown were among those receiving adaptive strollers. LaVallee said the strollers, unlike motorized wheelchairs, are light in weight and fully collapsible, making them an ideal mode of transportation for quick trips.

Samantha Boyd said daughter Izzy’s new stroller will enable the family to go out together as a unit with more ease. “It would make outings way less stressful,” she said.

“They are designed for temporary transportation and not to replace a wheelchair,” LaVallee said, adding past recipients have also used the strollers as backup when their primary transportation device is out of service.

He shared how one boy, whose motored chair broke, was facing a six-week leave from school while the chair awaited repairs. “He got a stroller and didn’t miss a day of school,” he said.

TUI staff, inspired by the memory of their co-worker Amanda Boor, raised \$3,669 for Variety ahead of LaVallee’s visit. Boor, 35, of Hopewell Township, died unexpectedly in November. Her husband, Spencer Boor, was in attendance Wednesday for the presentation. The TIU staff donation covered the cost of three communication devices.

Dr. Shawn Kovac, TIU’s executive director, challenged the convention audience to take up the effort in their home districts, by raising funds and increasing awareness about the My Bike, My Stroller and My Bike programs. “Spread the word about Variety and find more students who can benefit,” Kovac said.

LaVallee, who’s spent his life and career in Pittsburgh, credits his longtime friend, the late Fred Rogers, with pointing him toward opportunities to help children. LaVallee, who’s family operated the Kunst Bakery for decades, said his work with children began in the 1980s when his hometown was facing an economic devastation following the demise of an industry that gave the Iron City its claim to fame.

“In the early ‘80s in western Pennsylvania, the steel industry collapsed and we lost 140,000 jobs,” LaVallee said. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister and host of the iconic “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” PBS program, encouraged LaVallee to check out the Highmark Caring Foundation, created to assist uninsured children. LaVallee said the Caring Foundation became the model for the state’s Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

“We had the chance to work with members of Congress and got the federal CHIP program going which has now helped 100 million kids,” LaVallee said.

In 1994, LaVallee’s his 21-year-old stepson Josh was killed in an accident, devastating the family, especially Josh’s 6-year-old younger brother. Again, Rogers set LaVallee on a path to forge good out of tragic circumstances.

“He told me to take my grief and do something with it,” LaVallee said. “He’s the only person who could have given me that advice.”

The result was the Highmark Caring Place for grieving children and their families which has a center in Pittsburgh and now four other locations around the state.

Through those experiences LaVallee said he’s learned “in adversity, good can come” and has put that philosophy into practice with Variety starting in 2012 with the launch of the My Bike program. My Stroller and My Voice soon followed. LaVallee said while he considers himself blessed to have a role in improving children’s lives, he worried about the families who aren’t aware of Variety’s services.

“The families who don’t know about us are what keeps me up at night,” he said. LaVallee noted the programs’ income guidelines are inclusive; a family of four can earn up to \$128,750 and still qualify.

For more information about the program, visit [varietypittsburgh.org](http://varietypittsburgh.org).

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