

REPUBLICAN HERALD

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Parents receive voice devices for kids at IU 29 distribution

May 23, 2020

Republican Herald



JACQUELINE DORMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Lotti Deiter, left, of Pottsville, talks about the Variety communication device she just picked up Friday for her son Daniel Deiter, right, at the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29, Mar Lin. Also in the car in passenger seat, at left, is David Deiter. The device gives children a voice at all times for those that have a communication disorder.

MAR LIN — Jenn Smithers said her son, Kyle, only talks “when he wants to.”

The Minersville single mother of four said she was grateful for the voice assist device she picked up Friday at Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29.

“It’s hard when you don’t know what your child wants,” she said. “This will help us get through the summer and help him talk more. You want to do everything you can for your kids ... For an organization to help these families is just wonderful and the school has been so supportive.”

Kyle, 15, and his older brother both have autism, their mother said.

“They see things we don’t see and it’s amazing to see an unfiltered view,” she said.

“Variety, The Children’s Charity” sent 18 voice devices to IU Director of Special Education Debra Arnold, so the equipment could be distributed in time for summer. They were initially going to be presented in April, but schools closed. Local speech therapists prepped the Variety My Voice Program devices and families came to a drive-by presentation Friday in Mar Lin to receive them.

Other families will receive their voice device directly from speech therapists through a safe, coordinated drop-off, if they were unable to pick them up Friday.

Variety donated \$83,100 in equipment, including 23 free adaptive bicycles, three adaptive strollers and 31 communication devices at the IU in January to individuals with disabilities. Recipients can be ages 3 to 21, and do

not have to attend the IU or public schools to be eligible, Arnold said. The IU website, iu29.org, explains eligibility guidelines.

“The unique delivery of a child’s voice is phenomenal because there have been many news stories covering families picking up food in these challenging times, but this is a story at which families are picking up their child’s ‘voice’ or receiving it at their home. Through working with the child’s SLP (speech and language pathologist), the child will be able to tell their family what they’re thinking and feeling, and now, more than ever, our kids need a voice,” Charlie LaVallee, Variety CEO, said.



JACQUELINE DORMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Tammy Falls, speech therapist with the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29, left, talks with Jenn Smithers, of Minersville, while Smithers picks up her Variety communication device for her son at the IU 29 in Mar Lin on Friday, May 22, 2020. The device gives children a voice at all times for those that have a communication disorder.

Lottie Deiter said the voice device she applied for will help her son, Daniel, 18.

“When we were notified, we were absolutely thrilled,” Deiter, of Pottsville, said. Her son has been attending the IU since he was in preschool.

“This is going to be so much easier,” she said, noting Daniel had used an iPad before that had a communications app on it.

“We’ll be able to communicate back and forth, and his teacher, Mrs. (Suzie) Oswald, has already put information on for him. The teachers and administration here have just been phenomenal to our son and are absolutely the best,” she said. Lottie’s husband, David, joined her and their son for the pickup.

In addition to Arnold and Oswald, others assisting Friday were Tammy Falls, IU speech and language therapist; Amy Withelder, speech and language pathologist from the Pottsville Area School District; and Sharon Morgan, a behavior interventionist.



JACQUELINE DORMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Deb Arnold, special education director for Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29, talks about the distribution of the Variety communication devices at the IU 29 in Mar Lin on Friday, May 22, 2020. The device gives children a voice at all times for those that have a communication disorder.

LaVallee said the partnership between Variety and IU 29 is a story of hope.

“No one would have guessed that in the midst of a pandemic, so many children in Schuylkill County who are nonverbal or have a communication disorder could make significant progress in their ability to communicate through using a communication device. We truly commend the IU 29 team and all of its SLP’s that are going the extra mile, so that kids with special needs are able to move forward instead of regressing during this pandemic.”

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