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Vicki Terwilliger

Schuylkill IU 29 distributes more adaptive equipment

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David McKeown / Staff Photographer TJ Cooper rides his new adaptive bike with help from his mother Kelly Froan, both of Saint Clair, at the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 on Monday, June 29, 2020.

MAR LIN — Thomas Joseph “T.J.” Cooper fared better Monday atop his new set of wheels.

T.J. had been released from the hospital with hungry bone syndrome just over a week ago, according to his grandmother, Grace Karrer, of Saint Clair. He received treatment with doses of calcium, but it negatively affected his heart rhythm, she said.

“He doesn’t get to do too much. This is his first bike,” Karrer said. “He loves it.”

Cooper, 12, of Saint Clair, was one of the recipients of a free adaptive bike at the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 in Mar Lin.

Variety — the Children’s Charity, headquartered in Wexford in partnership with the IU 29 and Blackburn’s, a medical equipment supplier, presented \$73,200 worth of equipment, including 34 adaptive bikes and eight adaptive strollers to children with disabilities in Schuylkill County.



David McKeown / Staff Photographer Adaptive bikes are lined up at the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 as they wait their new owners on Monday, June 29, 2020.

The adaptive equipment was also delivered to children and their families Thursday, according to Debra Arnold, IU director of special education.

Between January and June of this year, Variety and the IU have presented 115 adaptive bikes, adaptive strollers and communication devices to county youth. Monday was the third distribution, Arnold said.

Safety features on the bikes include a steering bar and specially designed pedals that keep the rider's feet flat and their toes from dragging on the ground. Some seats are designed with special straps, or pads, to support the rider's mid-section and back. A child can transition as they grow to a larger bike or stroller, Arnold said.

T.J. has attended the IU since preschool, his grandmother said.



T.J. Cooper, Saint Clair, rides his new adaptive bike.

His mother, Kelly Foran, took direction from physical therapist Kathy Ryan Motuk as she showed Foran the bike's features and explained how to safely place her son in and take him out of the Rifton brand bicycle. Foran said T.J. had previously received a Variety communication device, and they are also looking into a Variety stroller for him.

"He doesn't walk very far, and I usually take him to the playground where it's flat," Foran said.

Michael Hiester watched in the IU parking lot as his wife, Jodi, walked along with their daughter, Heather, 7, on her debut ride on her sparkling, pink number. Emily Barkus, Heather's physical therapist assistant, was by her side.

"She had a regular bike, but she couldn't ride it," said Hiester, of Saint Clair. He said his daughter was so excited that she woke up early Monday asking if it was time to get her bicycle. She's an incoming second grader at Saint Clair Elementary School.

"We're hoping this will train her legs to be stronger. She's taking growth hormone shots. She can't go up steps without assistance. She's too small and can't ride a regular school bus, so she has to take a special van to school. We hope this gets everything moving in line and builds her strength," he said.

Charles P. LaVallee, chief executive officer of Variety, noted that even during the coronavirus pandemic, Variety and the IU have been able to provide the adaptive equipment to county families.



DAVID MCKEOWN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Heather Hiester, Saint Clair, rides her new adaptive bike Monday with help from Kathy Tuan Motuk, Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 physical therapist, at the Intermediate Unit in Mar Lin.

Students did not have to attend the IU to be eligible for the devices. Their families only needed to fill out an application form and meet certain criteria. The application and a donation link are available on the IU website, iu29.org.

"If Schuylkill County, in rural Pennsylvania, can mobilize together out of dedication and commitment to the kids, then this can be replicated over and over. IU29 has established an incredible model that should inspire the rest of the commonwealth," LaVallee said.



David McKeown / Staff Photographer Heather Hiester, Saint Clair, rides his new adaptive bike with help from her mother Jodi Hiester, center, with Kathy Tuan Motuk, Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 physical therapist, instructing at the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 on Monday, June 29, 2020.

Mickey Sgro, Variety board member and District Council 83 Director of AFSCME, said the board was grateful to IU 29 Executive Director Dr. Gregory Koons and Arnold for their “dedicated efforts that have proven tremendously successful in finding eligible kids and providing them with this life-changing equipment.”

In addition to Ryan Motuk and Barkus, others assisting in the distribution were Tammy Falls, speech therapist; Lynda Yordy, supervisor of early intervention; Ann Marie Mummey, Kris Pope and Charlotte Wright, special education department secretaries; and Grace and Hope Motuk, Kathy’s children.

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