

# Latrobe Bulletin

NOW ONLINE at: [LatrobeBulletinNews.com](http://LatrobeBulletinNews.com)

Zach D'Amico

## Variety presents adaptive bikes, strollers to Westmoreland children

March 17, 2021 // *Latrobe Bulletin* (FRONT PAGE)



PHOTO BY ZACH D'AMICO | Eight-year-old Mailey Lopes of Cook Township is delighted with her new adaptive bike courtesy of Variety – the Children's Charity, with her mother Rachel guiding the three-wheeler. Mailey, who likes music and riding horses, has Down syndrome. The Pine Township-based nonprofit presented five bikes and three strollers to children with disabilities at the Westmoreland County courthouse on Tuesday.

An early birthday present was waiting for Mailey Lopes at the Westmoreland County courthouse lawn in Greensburg on Tuesday.

Mailey, who has Down syndrome, turns 9 on Sunday.

Her favorite show being “Sesame Street,” Mailey wore a beaming smile beneath her Cookie Monster-themed mask and said, “I’m a big shot,” as she tried out her new adaptive bike courtesy of Variety — the Children’s Charity.

“You couldn’t ask for it to be better,” said Rachel Lopes, Mailey’s mother. “Her birthday is on World Down Syndrome Day. This is like perfect timing.”

Mailey’s parents are Bob and Rachel Lopes. The family lives in Cook Township, and Mailey attends school within the Ligonier Valley School District.

In total, Pine Township-based Variety presented five bikes and three strollers to Westmoreland County children with disabilities on Tuesday.

Variety provides adaptive equipment at no cost to families who meet income guidelines with children ages 3 to 21 who have mental, physical or sensory disabilities. For example, a family of four can make up to \$132,500 annually to qualify.

“One out of three of our kids live with families that have no disposable income,” said Variety CEO Charlie LaVallee. “They might want to buy the bike for their child, but the money is going elsewhere. I’m grateful that we are helping the kids with special needs who are living in low income.”

To apply for the program, visit Variety’s website ([www.varietypittsburgh.org/applynow](http://www.varietypittsburgh.org/applynow)) or call 724-933-0460.

Eligible families can apply for more than one piece of equipment if their child can benefit.

The nonprofit began giving adaptive bikes to children in 2012 and has since expanded to provide adaptive strollers and communication devices.

It serves 71 counties in Pennsylvania and West Virginia and has provided more than 4,000 pieces of equipment worth over \$6.3 million.

Variety is launching a spring campaign to find the next 1,000 children with disabilities who could benefit from its free equipment programs, aimed to help youngsters live life to the fullest and not be left out.

“If you can’t ride a bike you’re left out,” said LaVallee. He said oftentimes the children they serve had to previously watch their friends, family and neighbors enjoy riding bikes in the summer while having to sit by and watch.

“Having the bike and to be able to be part of it,” LaVallee said, “It makes it so cool, plus the mastery you feel that you are able to do it.”

Lopes said that was the case with Mailey and her younger sister, Chloe.

“We haven’t had anything safe for her to go out on that she could actually control or peddle,” she said. “So now (Chloe) and her will be able to take them and go places.”

Mailey enjoys riding horses, playing outside, and especially, listening to music.



PHOTO BY ZACH D'AMICO | County Commissioners Sean Kertes and Gina Cerilli challenged Mailey to a playful race around the courthouse lawn.

The Westmoreland County Commissioners spent the afternoon Tuesday with children who received their adaptive equipment, challenging some of them to a playful race around the courthouse lawn.

Commissioner Gina Cerilli Thrasher said, “It’s my favorite day at the courthouse.” The bike and stroller presentations at the courthouse were canceled last year and scaled down this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“It’s great to see the excitement on the kids’ faces. As soon as they see the bikes, their eyes just light up,” Cerilli Thrasher said.

LaVallee’s goal is for every eligible child in Westmoreland County to receive the necessary adaptive equipment through Variety.

Including Tuesday’s distribution, Variety will have presented nearly 270 adaptive bikes, adaptive strollers and communication devices to children in the county.

“Charlie said the biggest thing they want to do is make sure every family that’s eligible in Westmoreland County gets a bike,” Commissioner Sean Kertes said. “That’s what we’re here today advocating for.”

Variety teams up with the state's intermediate units to identify eligible families. Tarentum-based Blackburn's Physician's Pharmacy Inc. supplies the adaptive equipment.

LaVallee has spent his entire professional career working in the nonprofit sector.

Inspired by a conversation with longtime friend and Latrobe's very own TV icon Fred Rogers, LaVallee started a new job at the Highmark Caring Foundation more than 40 years ago.

"My step son (Josh) had a tragic accident 27 years ago, and Fred said to me, 'Take your heartache and do something with it.'

"He realized something that I didn't realize."

So, LaVallee helped to create the Highmark Caring Place for grieving children, adolescents and their families.