

## Kiddie car makes big difference for little girl

By MICHAEL MORTENSEN  
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LACONIA – Sofia Wylie's life could be called an evolving miracle.

The 7-year-old was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy when she was just a few months old.

At one point there was doubt whether she would ever be able to talk, assuming the rare neuromuscular disorder – similar in some ways to Lou Gehrig's disease – did not claim her life before the time when children typically learn to talk fluently.

But as fate would have it, when Sofia was just 4½ months old she was approved for a clinical trial of a medication to improve motor function. Now, 6½ years later, Sofia has just finished first grade at Elm Street School.

This school year produced another miracle of sorts when Sofia was given a specially equipped battery-operated kiddie car which allows her to play outside with her classmates at recess.

Sofia's specially equipped bubble-

gum-pink car with a Minnie Mouse motif is the work of determination, ingenuity and trial-and-error experimentation by recent Laconia High School graduate Aidan Eldridge, who worked on the project under the guidance of Ken Martin, the engineering teacher at the Huot Career and Technical Center.

Making the car both safe and fun for Sofia to use required several modifications.

Eldridge needed to alter the car's remote control with two marshmallow-size control knobs with which Sofia manipulates the joysticks to steer the vehicle. A car seat with a likeness of Minnie Mouse was installed to ensure the proper amount of back support for Sofia. And an adjustable canopy was added to provide protection from the direct sun.

"I love the design process," said Eldridge, who this fall will be attending Worcester Polytechnic Institute, where he plans to major in industrial management engineering.

Eldridge estimates that he spent more

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Sofia Wylie sits in her pink kiddie car which is equipped with adaptive features that were designed and created by Aidan Eldridge, right, a recent Laconia High School graduate. Sofia has just completed first grade. (Michael Mortensen/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

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than 60 hours working on the project, beginning last October.

Retrofitting the car's control box and designing the canopy were the biggest creative challenges, Eldridge said.

The original plan had been to produce the adaptive car last spring, but just days before the project was to be undertaken by a member of the LHS Class of 2020, the schools were closed because of COVID and all students went into remote learning.

Sofia's mother, Natalia Wylie, said because of the car, Sofia can now really enjoy outdoor recess with her classmates.

"She can take the car onto the grass and have races with her friends," said Wylie, who accompanies Sofia to school every day to act as her nurse.

While working on the project has brought its own satisfaction, Eldridge said the biggest reward is seeing how it has allowed Sofia to enjoy life more.

"The best thing is being able to see her enjoying the car and being able to do things she wasn't able to do before."



Elm Street School student Sofia Wylie gets around in an adaptive kiddie car which was created by Laconia High School senior Aidan Eldridge. (Michael Mortensen/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

Eldridge is helping to organize a fundraiser at Opechee Park, scheduled for Aug. 7, to benefit Cure SMA which funds research into the disease and offers support for those with the disease and their families.

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