

# Iowa letter carrier goes RUNNING WITH RYAN



**O**ut on his route, Mason City, IA Branch 471 carrier **Brad Gentz** had seen a boy sitting in his front yard under a tree, in a wheelchair, on sunny days. He didn't know the boy's name. But one sunny day last summer, an idea popped into Gentz's mind that would change both of their lives.

An avid runner, Gentz had watched a television documentary about a father who runs in marathons while pushing his son in a wheelchair. "I thought about that boy who sits outside," he said. "The very next day, I delivered the mail and there's Ryan at the mailbox."

Ryan Hemman, he soon learned, was a 15-year-old with spina bifida who was paralyzed from the waist down and who rarely went anywhere beyond school, home or the hospital. Spina bifida occurs when a baby is in the womb and its spinal column does not close all of the way, usually causing paralysis and other severe health problems.

Gentz approached Ryan's parents with an idea: Could he push Ryan in a marathon?

"His mother said, 'Are you out of your mind?'" Gentz recalled. Ryan's heavy motorized wheelchair couldn't be pushed; he also had severe medical issues that kept him near home and made even a minor infection life-threatening. His mother, Tami Hemman, was concerned about Ryan's safety in the middle of a crowded race.

But Gentz had done his research. He showed Ryan and his mother a picture of an adaptive chair custom-built by a company in Washington state specifically for the purpose of running safely while pushing someone with a disability. Gentz has a daughter with autism and has volunteered with Special Olympics, so he knew that people with disabilities can accomplish much more than

**Opposite page:** Branch 471 member Brad Gentz and Ryan Hemman  
**Right:** Gentz and Hemman at the finish line of their first race  
**Bottom:** The Running with Ryan T-shirts

expected. Ryan loved the idea, and his mother was convinced. “If Ryan wants to do it, I’m all for it,” she said.

All they needed was \$7,500 for the special chair.

Gentz reached out to friends and family to raise the funds through a Facebook page called “Running with Ryan.” He distributed T-shirts, too, and students at Osage High School, where everyone knew of Ryan but few knew him as a friend, began wearing the shirts and supporting his cause.

In September, the Osage High School girls volleyball team invited Ryan to speak at a game about his quest to run with Gentz. Ryan, shy and not used to attention, read his speech and received a standing ovation.

Ryan and everyone else in the gym were in for a surprise. Instead of taking months to raise money and order the chair, the donations had come in fast and the chair company, Adaptive Star, had rushed his order. Gentz unveiled the brand-new chair right then and there.

“I got done with the speech, and I turned around and there was the chair,” Ryan told *Runner’s World*.

Gentz strapped Ryan in and pushed him through the school. A crowd of supporters lined their path. With a police escort, they ran the mile to Ryan’s house.

A few days later, Gentz and Ryan ran in a 5K race that raised funds for University of Iowa Children’s Hospital, where Ryan had undergone 17 surgeries. Fellow



runners and spectators responded with enthusiastic support.

“I was so, so surprised at how many runners and how many people were at the finish line supporting me,” Ryan told KGAN Channel 2 in Iowa City.

“It means everything to us,” Tami Hemman said. “We never expected him to be able to do anything like that.”

But that was just the beginning. A local TV station and newspapers ran stories about the 5K. “Then the money rolled in,” Gentz said. “It really just exploded into this huge, huge thing.” When *Runner’s World* published an article, the story made its way beyond Iowa and the donations piled up even more. Ryan soon was autographing his T-shirts and fielding reporters’ questions.

With more than enough money to pay for the wheelchair, Gentz and Ryan gave some to the hospital and used the rest to start a local chapter of My Team Triumph, an organization that pairs athletes with people in wheelchairs to compete in races.

“Everyone who’s like me,” Ryan said, “in a wheelchair—they can do something like this.”

The pair has since run in other races and

plan to run in more. But running really isn’t the point, of course. A shy young man who once had few friends is now a celebrity in his town and has many supportive friends in his school, and a dedicated letter carrier has shown his community what inclusion of people with disabilities is all about—and also formed a deep bond with the quiet kid sitting under a tree on his route.

“He went from being this little boy in a wheelchair,” Gentz said, “and now, anywhere he goes, he’s like a rock star. It’s changed his life dramatically.

“It’s changed me, too,” Gentz added. “The friendship I have with Ryan is second to none.” Gentz has taken Ryan to football games and wrestling meets along with more runs. “He’s an unbelievable kid. Just a true blessing. It’s really a fulfilling journey.”

Gentz thinks back to the end of their inaugural run, which finished with runners entering Kinnick Stadium, home to Ryan’s beloved University of Iowa Hawkeyes.

Out of his chair and lying on the football field to rest, Ryan began to cry. Gentz was worried—was Ryan hurt?

But they were tears of joy.

“I never thought you could feel this good,” Ryan told him.

“That was the most awesome feeling in the world,” Gentz said. **PR**

