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CHARITY

Foundation gives teen special wheelchair

■ A race car driver and a teenage cattle rustler prove that some men stand tall - even in wheelchairs.

BY EILEEN SOLER
Special to The Miami Herald

Darrell Gwynn met his match this month — 16-year-old Levi Lamb.

Gwynn, a National Hot Rod Association Hall of Famer from Weston, and Levi, a hunter, fisherman and 4-H hog-raising champ from Okeechobee, came wheel-to-wheel at the Darrell Gwynn Foundation office in Davie.

The two, both belted into wheelchairs, refuse to let paralysis rob them of their lives.

Gwynn, paralyzed from the waist down in a 1990 racing accident just weeks after winning his second NHRA championship, uses his charity foundation founded in 2002 to donate wheelchairs to help others on wheels become more independent.

Levi, born with spina bifida, needed a new chair to replace the one beat up after years of no-limits backwoods adventures that include shooting rabbits for breakfast, roping steer and hunting alligator.

A 4-H Club member since age 7 and a member of the Future Farmers of America club at Okeechobee High School, Levi has more than a dozen trophies, ribbons and belt buckles to prove his passion. Last year, in his cowboy duds, the 90-pound competitor showed his family's giant steer from his worn and tattered chair. He won first place in his class, third in showmanship and third overall. "Someone had to do it," Levi said with a long country drawl.

Gwynn, who has spent

about \$1 million from the foundation so far to provide 100 wheelchairs to kids and adults with spinal cord injuries and illness, said Levi's new chair is the most rugged he has given yet.

"It's the perfect chair for Levi and the most active chair we've ever built. We want people to get out and enjoy life — Levi does that," Gwynn said.

Tough, durable and activity-friendly is exactly what Levi needs in a wheelchair, said his mother, Kelly Pankey, an Okeechobee County volunteer firefighter and paramedic.

"Levi has no fear — he needs a bulldozer to get around," Pankey said.

Gwynn called Levi's chair the "Hummer" of wheelchairs — a lightweight aluminum, hand-controlled chair with all-terrain wheels and thick sport casters, adjustable air seat cushions, mud side bars, a foot rest big enough for boots and a camouflage paint job.

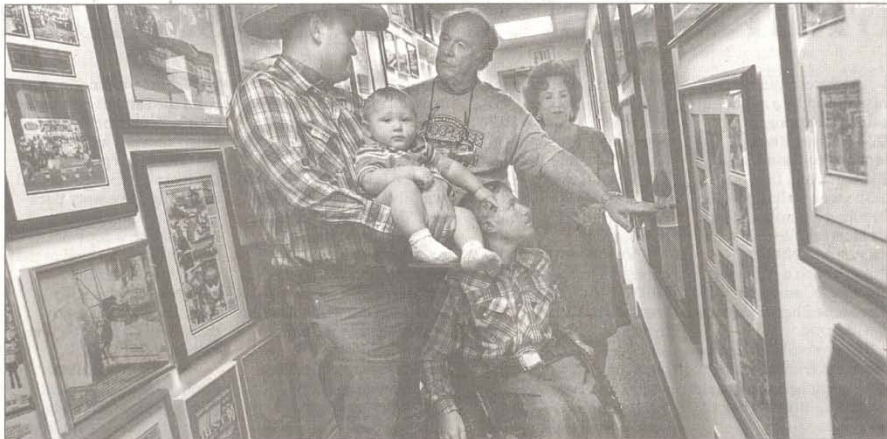
"I'm ready to mud-ball now," Levi said, referring to the off-road sport of racing through a pit of mud.

Levi's stepfather, Larry Pankey, who works on a 10,000-head cattle ranch, and Gwynn's father, Jerry Gwynn, who is also an NHRA champion, agreed during their Aug. 13 luncheon meeting that their sons are driven to win.

Jerry Gwynn said his son views the horrific day in March 1990 that put him in wheelchair as "one bad day in England" not an event that stopped his life.

The accident happened during an exhibition race at Santa Pod Raceway north of London.

Larry Pankey said Levi knows no bounds.



PHOTOS BY EILEEN SOLER/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

SHOW AND TELL: Levi Lamb, 16, of Okeechobee, in wheelchair above, his stepfather, Larry Pankey, left, and his brother, Landon, 10 months, get a photo tour from race car champion Darrell Gwynn's parents, Jerry and Joan Gwynn, at the Darrell Gwynn Foundation office in Davie. Below, Darrell Gwynn of Weston pose with Levi.



"I've seen him flip over in the chair. He just flips it back up and gets back to doing whatever he was doing," he said.

The lunch, during which Darrell Gwynn and Levi shared stories about racing, fishing and alligator

hunting, was followed the next day by an official presentation at Bass Pro Shops in Dania Beach.

There, in front of an audience of hunters gathered for a meat-processing seminar, Levi took ownership of his new wheels and

a \$500 Bass Pro Shops gift certificate. Levi said the first thing he'd do in the chair at home in Okeechobee is go hog-hunting.

His dream adventure? Parasailing. High school ambition? Compete in the National High School

Rodeo Association. Next set of wheels? A Ford pickup truck from the 1980s — any model will do.

For more about the Darrell Gwynn Foundation, visit www.darrelgwynnfoundation.org or call 954-792-7223.

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