

Baddour foundation donates van to help family of shaken baby

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Last Christmas, Carrie Bergeron's three young nephews gave her a small gift — a purple Matchbox van.

It was a miniature version of what Carrie truly needed — a van with a wheelchair lift to take her 12-year-old son Wayne Elliott to doctor's appointments. At 5 months old, Wayne became a victim of shaken baby syndrome and was left unable to walk, talk or see.

That little Matchbox car will hang in Carrie's new handicapped-accessible conversion van with a lift, given to her last week by the Sen. Steven Baddour Charity Fund. It was the largest gift given to a family by the nonprofit group since its inception in 2003.

"I can't tell you how much we need this," Carrie said to Baddour and other members of the fund as they gave her a tour of Wayne's new wheels.

Jim Zenevitch is on the fund's board of directors. He said the foundation's mission is to improve the quality of life for Merrimack Valley children. In the past six years, it has given out more than \$95,000 to local hospitals, food pantries and families.

It's those gifts that go directly to the families that move and motivate the group the most. Giving this van to Carrie and her family is "one of the best things we've ever done," Zenevitch said.

"We have all been talking the past few nights about it," he said. "Our group is all about improving children's lives, and we hit the nail on the head with this one. It's overwhelming."

The fund grew out of a little teasing that Zenevitch and others were dealing to Baddour. Baddour said they were talking about all politicians being out for themselves.

"I challenged them and said, 'Let's start a charity and let's raise some money.' That's how it started," Baddour said. "But from the very first gift we gave, we immediately became hooked on giving."

Zenevitch says it's the board of directors that usually hears about families in need who approach them and say, "Can you help us?" Some of the items the foundation has given include a special stroller donated to a handicapped child in Haverhill and a wheelchair lift for a Methuen family's home.

The group has also given money to all of the local hospitals — Lawrence General, Caritas Holy Family, Merrimack Valley and Anna Jaques — and made large donations to Lazarus House in Lawrence and Pettingill House in Salisbury.

The fund heard about Wayne from his nurse, Cyndi Chase-Klavenieks, last October. She told them how Wayne was outgrowing his car seat and the family had few options to get him to doctor's appointments. He could go to school because a bus picked him up, but the family couldn't go anywhere together because they couldn't fit in their 2000 Jeep Cherokee.

With this van, the family will be able to go on a camping trip later this summer. Carrie says Wayne can go fishing again.

"This is going to be life-altering for all of them," Chase-Klavenieks said. "It's incredible."

Baddour said he was immediately touched by Carrie and Wayne's story.

"Everything (Carrie) had to undergo, what she went through, the fact that she lives her life through this child and never gave up hope," he said. "Never being able to go out with Wayne and his siblings and his family, it was just overwhelming to me. When we met the family, we knew we made the right decision."

The fund spent \$18,000 on the van, including the cost of registering it and paying the insurance for a year. Carrie had no idea about the gift until the fund members showed up at her front door on Tuesday.

Family members watched and joked about how hard and almost successful Carrie was in holding back her tears. They hugged her and told her how now she would have no problem getting Wayne to the doctor.

She leaned down to her son and replied, "Never mind the doctor. We're going fishin'."

Most of the money raised comes from the charity fund's annual golf outing, which will be held tomorrow at Haverhill Country Club.