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FRONT PAGE

Autoworkers build ramps to help disabled residents

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From her wheelchair, the woman with glass bones smiles at the men with hammers.

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JILL TOYOSHIBA

Vicky Ridge of Cass County, who has a bone disease, is getting a new wheelchair ramp, thanks to autoworkers led by Kim Rowland (front left) and Phil Rangel (rear, from left), Todd Hachman, Jeff Chisam and Tom Macomber. Vicki's brother Josh White is at front right).

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They're Ford autoworkers, far from their assembly line, arriving in Vicki Ridge's backyard to make her life easier.

"It fills my heart," says Kim Rowland, 50, who leads the crew, the one woman among four men.

At 29, Ridge has already lived longer than any doctor predicted. Born with the most severe form of a genetic "brittle bone" disorder, osteogenesis imperfecta, she has bones so delicate they snap like glass reeds at the tiniest bump.

Because of the condition, Ridge, of rural Cass County, is tiny, too — her body, her flute-like voice. At 43 pounds, she is an adult woman using infant-size arms and hands to maneuver the joystick on her electric wheelchair.

"She had 76 bones broken just from being born," says her mother, Maggie Ridge, 52.

Vicki Ridge has long since lost track of exactly how many times her bones have cracked.

"It's more than 4,000 by now," she says, her mouth curling into a crooked, wry smile. "I'm used to bone pain."

That's where the Ford factory workers come in, a crew of five from United Auto Workers Local 249. There are Rowland of Liberty and Tom Macomber, 41, and Jeff Chisam, 39, both of Lathrop, Mo. Together with Todd Hachman, 41, of Lawson and Phil Rangel, 39, of Independence, the crew worked a collective 90 years on the Claycomo assembly line.

They realize that the ramp program, which began seven months ago, is a UAW and Ford Motor Co. public relations move to improve the image of union autoworkers and the auto industry in general. But it also has been a life-changing experience.

"You ask half the people out there their opinion about autoworkers and you get 'fat' and 'lazy' and 'drunk' and all that," says Macomber, a paint finisher.

Rowland thinks the U.S. auto industry's image is still suffering from the government bailout of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009. "The Big Three got a bad name," she says. So, when the union asked her to head up the new effort, she did.

The program, begun in Detroit by Ford and the UAW, has been expanded to include Chicago,

Louisville, Ky., Cleveland and Kansas City.

The idea: Find guys on the line with construction experience. Instead of paying them full union wages to build cars and trucks, Ford would pay them full wages to work 40 hours a week building wheelchair ramps. The union would buy the tools and materials. The ramps would be free to disabled people who could ill afford them.

People like Vicki Ridge.

“It is a wonderful program. It is a huge need,” said Alinda Dennis, senior vice president of community impact for the United Way of Greater Kansas City.

It is through affiliated United Way agencies that the Ford workers find the disabled, aged and low-income families they help.

“They had the resources,” Dennis said of the autoworkers, “the people and funds to build the ramps. We made the connection to the families in need.”

Now, not a worker on the crew would choose to go back to the assembly line.

“It has opened my eyes,” Macomber says.

“More satisfaction,” says Rangel.

“Out here,” says Chisam, “you see who you’re helping. You see the effects immediately. In the factory, you never get to that point.”

Hachman has been kidded by friends back at the factory.

“They razz us a lot for what we’re doing,” he says. “They say, ‘You’re not working. You’re not doing nothing.’ They have have no idea who we’re helping.”

Hachman, raised with a disabled aunt who died young with spina bifida, does know. He and his crew have seen the need and the freedom provided by a 10-, 20-, sometimes 50-foot wood ramp built in a day.

There was 71-year-old Boyd Durbin, a former power company lineman, living in his Independence home, his body racked by more than a decade battling cancer.

“He got so he couldn’t walk,” said his wife, Zelda, 80. “He became confined to a wheelchair. It has been a year at least. He gets stir crazy once in a while.”

She was hardly strong enough, without help, to guide her husband down their outside steps.

“I was stuck in here like a mummy most of the time,” Boyd Durbin said.

Then, not long before the new year, Rowland and the guys came in the cold and, in one afternoon, built a ramp that allows Durbin and his wife easy access to her car.

“It was a little before Christmas. I remember,” Zelda Durbin said. “They placed a wreath on it.”

Davita Haynes and her husband, Joe, live in Kansas City’s Northeast area. They have six children ages 4 to 22. Three have serious issues: A 7-year-old with leukemia, a 10-year-old with an autism spectrum disorder and William, age 12.

At 6 months old, William suffered a severe traumatic brain injury when a car smashed into the rear of the Haynes' car. William was the only one injured.

"He is blind and developmentally delayed. He is in a diaper and we have to feed him," said his mother, who works two jobs to make ends meet. The driver at fault was uninsured. The family got nothing.

"In some aspects, he is a 1-year-old," she said.

But he is big, about 5 feet tall and 120 pounds. He can't walk. Before the ramp, the Hayneses would struggle to pull their son up their old concrete steps.

"Every time I see the ramp, I think of them," Davita Haynes said of the autoworkers. "They came. It was the coldest day you could imagine. There was still snow on the ground. ...

"They came at like 8 in the morning and by the time my son got home, he was able to go up the wheelchair ramp. I think of them and it makes me happy to think there were people willing to help us."

Now they're helping Ridge, who says her greatest sense of freedom comes from floating in her younger brother's arms in the above-ground pool in their backyard.

But the pool is hard to get to. For Ridge to get in the water, she must guide her wheelchair out the home's front door, along a gravel road, down a dirt driveway and over a choppy lawn. A sudden jerk or a wheel in a divot could jar her body and break bones. And has.

At the pool's edge, her mother picks her up and hands her to her younger brother Jacob, 22, in the water.

"It doesn't hurt," Ridge says. "It's just relaxing. You're weightless."

Last week, the autoworkers began a ramp that will descend from the Ridges' back door to a platform at the pool's edge. Unlike most projects, this one will take a few more days. Wet soil wasn't allowing the footings to dry.

"I really appreciate what they're doing for me," Ridge says.

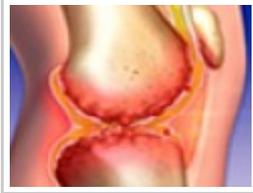
Rowland says thanks are hardly necessary. She's not sure how long the program will last, but if it were up to her, it would go on indefinitely.

"I have the greatest job in the world," she says.

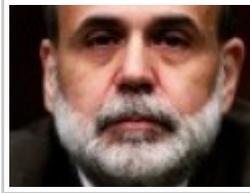
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