

# Baker City boy gets student-built, off-road wheelchair

**Electric-powered chair for Gus Macy was built by students from Umatilla robotics team**

BY ERICK PETERSON

East Oregonian

UMATILLA — Gus Macy, son of Levi and Karla of Baker City, is set for a very enjoyable summer, according to his mother. Team Confidential, the Umatilla High School robotics team, is responsible for some of his latest summertime plans.

Students constructed a wheelchair that, according to the team's coach and UHS teacher, Kyle Sipe, is more than a typical chair. This chair was made specifically for 6-year-old Gus, who has spina bifida and is unable to use his legs.

"What we determined to do as a robotics club is to give him a chance to have more activities with his family outside of normal wheelchair activity," the coach said.

He described it as a "trike, retro-fitted into an e-bike." It's powered by electricity, so Gus, who cannot operate a regular bike, can use it. He can use his thumb to control the throttle.

Karla Macy said that such chairs, built for off-road adventuring, can cost \$10,000 to \$20,000, or above. This one, she said, will make a big difference in her son's life.

"This is a new and exciting way for him to get around," she said.

## A heart-felt project

Sipe said that this was not only a big project for his students; it was a meaningful one. Students planned its construction during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020/21. When they couldn't see one another in person, they diagrammed the chair remotely.

Students conversed with each other via the internet about the build. This gave them something to do and to look forward to, their teacher said. Also, it provided a reason for them to keep in touch.

When lockdown ended, they got together and enjoyed teaming up once again, as they had done with other projects. At least 35 students pitched in on this project, working whenever they had a free moment.

"I couldn't hazard a guess as to how many hours they spent, but it was a lot," Sipe said.

He and his students weren't the



Gus Macy takes his first drive of the chair built by Umatilla High School students.

Umatilla School District/Contributed Photo



Umatilla School District/Contributed Photo

Gus Macy (front, center) poses next to his new wheelchair, which was built by Team Confidential, the Umatilla High School robotics team.

only people responsible for this new chair, however.

## The dynamic duo and super students

Heidi Sipe, Umatilla School superintendent and wife to the robotics teacher, also worked to make this gift possible. She said their effort was like other work they have done in the past.

"I always do the organizing and

financing piece, and Kyle makes the real work happen," she said.

The superintendent said she discovered this need while at a legislative meeting. Gus' mom was a speaker at the meeting, as she was advocating as an early childhood intervention educator.

"I met her there and was really inspired by her," Heidi Sipe said.

They stayed in touch after the

meeting, and they discussed the possibility of the Umatilla robotics team helping Gus.

The robotics team is often busy, but their schedule opened up during the pandemic. There was no in-person school, and competitions were canceled.

"The kids needed a project," she said.

Also, local companies and people were willing to fund the project. Cattle Drive Leather Co. was the primary sponsor.

The Lorence Family and Evangeline Gifts were sponsors, too, and Amazon Web Services helped fund the team's trip to Baker City to deliver the bike to Gus.

She called the experience of delivering the chair, and seeing the surprise on Gus' face, "the greatest thing ever." Some of the students, who worked on the chair, agreed.

## Fostering community involvement

Avery Gutierrez, Confidential officer and member for three years, said she was very happy about this project. She added that the robotics team has introduced her to community service; Gutierrez hadn't done such work previous to joining Con-

fidential. Lately, she has performed yard work and helped out in other ways with her team.

She said she likes this sort of work, as it brings her closer to others. Also, she enjoys learning new skills, she said. Though the wheelchair project is not robotics, per se, it did involve wiring and other skills.

"We started by getting measurements — his height and weight — and we worked to adjust it to his needs," Gutierrez said.

According to Gutierrez, Gus hugged his mom and gave everyone on the team high fives upon receiving the chair.

Meghan Owens, lead of programming and electrical for Confidential, has been with the team for four years. Like Gutierrez, most of her community service work has been through her robotics team, she said.

Also like Gutierrez, Owens said she "gets a lot" from her service.

"We get really connected with our community," she said. She added that she has learned much about the people of her community, as well as the area's history, businesses and services.

She also said that Gus was happy about the chair, even though he had an accident on his first drive.

## Adventures started with a spill

Karla Macy confirmed that her son did, in fact, have an accident, though it was minor and not enough to scare him away from the gift. Upon receiving the wheelchair, Gus steered it into a curb and took a tumble.

"It only took him about five minutes to figure out how to tip it over," she said.

She said Gus was fine, as the chair was built with safety in mind. A car seat, with a five-point harness, is part of the wheelchair. Also, he has a helmet.

"What's really good about it is that it's a pretty good size, and I think it's something he can use," she said. "I think this is something that can last him his whole life, with some minor adjustments."

Gus' mother expressed much gratitude for the chair and the kindness of the robotics team — they spoke with him when designing the chair and later, when they met him in person, one student presented him with a stuffed toy.

"Those students from Umatilla have been so awesome," she said.

# Oregon's prison chief in lead for top federal prisons job

BY MICHAEL BALSAMO AND MICHAEL R. SISAK

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Colette Peters, the director of Oregon's prison system, has now emerged as the leading contender to run the federal prison system, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Wednesday, June 15.

Peters, who has run the state's corrections department since 2012, is at the top of the list of candidates to replace Bureau of Prisons Director Michael Carvajal, who submitted his resignation in January but said he would stay on until a successor was named, the person said.

She would be the 11th person to lead the Bureau of Prisons since its founding more than 90 years ago, and only the second director with no prior experience at the agency, the Justice Department's largest. While many officials from inside the Bureau of Prisons applied for the post, the Biden administration was looking for someone who was focused on reforming an agency that has had cultural issues for decades.

Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco has been leading the search for Carvajal's replacement. The leadership change comes in the wake of AP reporting that has uncovered widespread problems at the agency, including sexual abuse by correctional officers and critically low staffing levels that have hampered responses to emergencies.

The person was not authorized to discuss details of the job search and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Peters did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment. The development was first reported by the Oregon Capital Chronicle.

As director of Oregon's prison system, Peters is responsible for about 4,700 employees in an agency with a \$2 billion budget. There are about 14,700 inmates in the state's 14 prisons.

The state corrections department has also touted her role in the state's efforts to reduce the prison population and reduce recidivism.

Peters has a master's degree in criminal justice from the University of Colorado in Denver and a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Oregon's prison system, like many in the U.S., had a wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths, and Peters' agency has been criticized for not doing enough to respond to the pandemic behind bars. In Oregon, 46 people in the Department of Corrections' custody have so far died after testing positive for COVID-19, and more than 5,400 people have tested positive for the virus while in custody.

In 2020, Peters publicly apologized for an inmate's death as the state prison system agreed to pay a record \$2.75 million to the family of the man who died from the flu. The settlement came nine months after Michael Barton's family filed a \$15 million wrongful death lawsuit accusing prison staff of failing to treat the 54-year-old man for the flu and then covering up his flu-related death.

The Bureau of Prisons similarly faced criticism over the explosion of COVID-19 in the nation's 122 federal prisons. Carvajal, 54, was appointed director of the federal Bureau of Prisons in February 2020 by then-Attorney General William Barr; just before the COVID-19 pandemic began raging in federal prisons nationwide, leaving tens of thousands of inmates infected with the virus and resulting in 295 deaths.

An agency insider who started as a correctional officer and worked his way up the ranks, Carvajal's tumultuous tenure as director included a failed response to the pandemic, widespread criminal activity among employees, inmate deaths and dozens of escapes.

Carvajal also oversaw an un-

precedented run of federal executions in the waning months of the Trump presidency that were so poorly managed they became virus superspreader events.

The AP's reporting exposing those problems compelled Congress to investigate and prompted increased calls from lawmakers for Carvajal to resign or be fired by Attorney General Merrick Garland.

The chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Carvajal "failed to address the mounting crises in our nation's federal prison system, including failing to fully implement the landmark First Step Act," a bipartisan criminal justice measure passed during the Trump administration that was meant to improve prison programs and reduce sentencing disparities.

Biden administration officials had discussions about whether to remove Carvajal in spring 2021, after the AP reported that widespread correctional officer vacancies were forcing prisons to expand the use of cooks, teachers, nurses and other workers to guard inmates.

The Bureau of Prisons is the only Justice Department agency whose director isn't subject to Senate confirmation. Currently, the attorney general can just appoint someone to the position.

A bill introduced in Congress days after Carvajal's resignation would require Senate confirmation for future bureau directors — putting them under the same level of scrutiny as leaders of the FBI and other federal agencies — but, so far, the measure hasn't come up for a vote.

Others being considered for the job included Gary Mohr, the former director of Ohio's prison system. While many had pushed Mohr for the position, he never formally applied for the job and is no longer in the running.

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