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More than a Van for Blake – AT3 Center News & Tips

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Kansas Assistive Technology (AT) Specialist Sarah Knutson knew it was important to help Blake and his family obtain accessible transportation. What she didn't anticipate was how the purchase would transform Blake.

Sometimes a van is more than just a van. State AT Programs understand this. All states have programs that can help people acquire the assistive technology they need, and some offer a way for individuals with disabilities and their families to borrow money to finance the more expensive devices. Each year the programs help thousands of people with reasonable loan rates and terms (and often creative ingenuity) purchase accessible transportation. Borrowers use their vehicles to obtain employment, get to school and medical appointments and generally improve their quality of life and independence. When public transportation isn't accessible, reliable or even available ... a van is much more than a van.

While the need for an adapted vehicle may be commonplace, Blake's situation was somewhat unique. Blake is 9 years old, has cerebral palsy, and relies on a power wheelchair to get

around. A couple years ago his parents divorced and Blake's mom, Sonya, moved out of Blake's school district. Blake continued attending the same school, but his mom needed to drive him there and back. Without an accessible van, Blake could not travel with his power wheelchair. The result was his power chair stayed at school, and Blake traveled home with a portable manual chair.

That solution made good sense temporarily, but then the days without his power chair at home became months and years, and the impact became unacceptable. Indeed, when AT Specialist Sarah Knutson met Blake last May with his mom, she saw how vitally important an adapted van was for this family. Blake couldn't independently move a manual wheelchair and often stayed parked in one place. "He was so depressed and withdrawn," she says.

Compounding the need for this van, Sarah soon learned, was Blake's extended family. Blake and his 5-year-old sister live with their mom and also their grandfather who has paraplegia and uses a power wheelchair himself. The van Blake's mom had in mind to purchase would accommodate not one, but two power chair users!

Sarah is an AT Specialist with the Resource Center for Independent Living, an [Assistive Technology for Kansans \(ATK\)](#) community partner. ATK helped Blake's family acquire their van. Here's how they did it:

1. They worked with Sonya and a vendor to identify an older model accessible van with a lower sticker price, and the adaptations

necessary to serve the family's needs.

2. They fundraised nearly one-third the cost of this van from in-state and out-of-state charities: the Kansas Society for Children with Challenges, the Cerebral Palsy Research Foundation, Independence Inc., and Friends of Man (a Colorado charity which will match up to 50% of funds raised in-state by an applicant).
3. They helped Sonya apply for a [K-Loan](#) (the Kansas Alternative Finance Program) to finance the balance of the van with affordable payments made over a 5-year period.

The result? A monthly payment roughly equal to the one Sonya was already paying for the Ford Escape she would now upgrade.

Today Blake's family rides all together.



Sarah recalls how when she first met Blake, he was slow to

respond to her. “Occasionally, if you asked him questions about a game on his iPad, he might smile at you,” she says. “But it was NOTHING like afterward.”

After Sonya bought the van and Blake brought home his power chair, Blake would smile. Sarah says he would pull up into a conversation and make eye contact with people who were speaking and smile continuously.

“It was just one of the most dramatic changes I’ve seen in a child,” she says.

It’s been about 7 months since Sonya acquired her accessible van. Not only is her family now all attending church together, going out for meals, the park, and shopping expeditions, she has back her gregarious guy.

Indeed, sometimes a van is more than a van.

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