

Brad Gentz

Mason City, IA Branch 471



2016 HUMANITARIAN
HERO OF THE YEAR

Out on his route, Mason City, IA Branch 471 carrier **Brad Gentz** had seen a boy sitting in his front yard under a tree, in a wheelchair, on sunny days. Gentz didn't know the boy's name. But one such day last summer, an idea popped into Gentz's mind that would change both of their lives.

An avid runner, Gentz had watched a television documentary about a father who runs in marathons while pushing his son in a wheelchair. "I thought about that boy who sits outside," he said. "The very next day, I delivered the mail and there's Ryan at the mailbox."

Ryan Hemman, he soon learned, was a teenager with spina bifida who was paralyzed from the waist down and who rarely went anywhere beyond school, home or the hospital. Spina bifida happens while a baby is in the womb and the spinal column does not close all of the way, usually causing paralysis and other severe health problems.

Gentz approached Hemann's parents with an idea: Could he push Ryan in a marathon?

They boy's mother, Tami Hemann, was skeptical because of Ryan's heavy motorized wheelchair and fragile condition, but Gentz had done his research. He showed Ryan and his mother a picture of a custom-built adaptive running wheelchair, and his mother was convinced.

All they needed was \$7,500 for the chair.

Gentz reached out to friends and family to raise the funds through a Facebook page called "Running with Ryan." Students at Osage High School, where everyone knew of Ryan but few knew him as a friend, supported his cause.

At a volleyball game, the Osage High girls' volleyball team invited Ryan to speak about his quest to run with Gentz. Ryan, shy and not used to attention, read his speech and received a standing ovation. Then the letter carrier surprised the teen and the crowd with the new chair. Donations, it turned out, had come in fast, and the chair company, Adaptive Star, had rushed the order.

Gentz strapped Ryan in and pushed him through the school. A crowd of supporters lined their path. With a police escort, they left the school grounds and ran the mile to Ryan's house.

A few days later, Gentz and Ryan participated in a 5K race that raised



funds for University of Iowa Children Hospital, where Ryan had undergone 17 surgeries. Fellow runners and spectators responded with enthusiastic support.

“I was so, so surprised at how many runners and how many people were at the finish line supporting me,” Ryan said.

“It means everything to us,” Ryan’s mother said. “We never expected him to be able to do anything like that.”

The pair has since run in other races and plans to run in more. But running isn’t really the point, of course. A shy young man who once had few friends is now a celebrity in his town and has many supportive friends in his school, and a dedicated letter carrier has shown his community what inclusion of people with disabilities is all about—and has also formed a deep bond with the quiet kid sitting under a tree on his route.

“He went from being this little boy in a wheelchair,” Gentz said, “and now, anywhere he goes, he’s like a rock star. It’s changed his life dramatically.

“It’s changed me, too,” he said. “The friendship I have with Ryan is second to none.

“I just wanted to share what I love to do with this boy. I wasn’t even looking to become his friend. It was never even part of the plan. And now it’s my life.” Gentz added. “I never in a million years thought doing one little nice deed would come back to me this way. I can say without a shadow of a doubt my one little gesture for another became a pot of gold.”

In naming Gentz NALC’s Humanitarian of the Year, the Heroes of the Year judges said, “This was an awesome display of compassion and courage for a worthy cause. He changed this young man’s life.”

Gentz and Ryan plan to be back in Washington, DC, a month after the Heroes of the Year ceremony to run the Marine Corps Marathon together.



Brad Gentz with
Ryan Hemann