

A dream

Some kids want to be firemen or policemen. Joel Hasken dreamed of wearing a letter carrier's uniform.



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As a young child, Joel Hasken would greet his letter carrier at the door of his home in Elgin, IL, and collect the mail. He loved to play with toy mailboxes and pretend letters. And sometimes he would follow his letter carrier, Bruce Beu of Wheeling, IL Branch 4739, down Enterprise Street as he walked his route. "He would follow me around or wait for me almost every day," said Beu, who began delivering the mail to the Hasken home before Joel was born. "He was always ready to roll."

Joel also loved to wait on the front porch to receive the mail directly from Beu, and his parents had to be careful to make sure he didn't lose the bills.

love for people. Joel always said hello when Beu stopped at his house on his route, and the youngster liked to greet strangers with a friendly wave wherever he went. And while other boys his age wanted video games for Christmas, Joel always yearned for a new scooter or bike.

"He was crazy about being outside," said Faith. "He hated to be cooped up."

A uniform of his own

Late last year, the family noticed a strange weakness on one side of Joel's

body. On Christmas he began limping noticeably. A few days later, doctors at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago found a tumor in Joel's brain—one that could not be surgically removed. Joel spent the next few weeks in the hospital. Despite his illness, Joel's friendly side didn't waver. He walked the halls and greeted everyone he saw. "He was kind of like the mayor," said Faith. "He would stop and shake every single nurse's hand."

A few weeks later, it was clear that the growing tumor could not be treated. The doctors said Joel would live another two to six months.

To help Joel make his dream of delivering the mail come true, Faith asked John Serrato of South Elgin, a Branch 4739 letter carrier who attended church with the Haskens, if he could get permission from the Postal Service for Joel



Photo by Christopher Hankins, Daily Herald
Renee Bednard, one of many postal employees who delivered well wishes to the Haskens.



Photo by Christopher Hankins, Daily Herald

Joel's parents, Lloyd and Faith, along with sister Grace, 10, and brother Nathan, 14, share a moment of prayer on 'Joel Hasken Day.'

to help his letter carrier deliver the mail to a few neighbors on his street by dropping it in the boxes.

Serrato worked the request up the chain of command, from his branch steward to supervisors to the postmaster, and got permission from the Postal Service for Joel to help deliver mail.

When word got around in the post office about a lovable, sick child who dreamed of carrying the mail, Serrato also received an outpouring of love and support for Joel from postal workers determined to help however they could. They planned a tour of the post office for him.

After a short stay in the hospital, Joel came home on January 22 to be with his family in his last days. The tumor had rendered Joel partially paralyzed and sightless in one eye. He was taking strong painkillers to ease his headaches, and was losing his appetite. Joel was too weak to walk the mail route as planned, or to come to the post office for a tour. So the letter carriers and other postal employees and supervisors worked overtime to make Joel's dream come true.

"His wish was to be a mailman," said Beu, "so he got a uniform." The Elgin letter carriers brought him a standard blue uniform and hat of his very own.

They also built a special mailbox, inscribed with his name and the Postal Service logo, and stood it outside the Hasken home for letter carriers to deliver the dozens of cards and messages from well-wishers.

One very special delivery

On February 12, Elgin Postmaster Susan Meathe went to his bedside and officially swore him in as an honorary letter carrier. She brought Joel his own satchel, flowers and a handful of balloons to decorate the mailbox. Joel watched a video that postal employees made that brought him on a virtual tour of the Elgin post office and welcomed him to their team. A proclamation by Postmaster General John Potter declaring Friday, February 12 an official "Joel Hasken Day" at the Elgin Post Office hung on the wall next to his bed.

Then Joel got the biggest special delivery a kid could ask for: Watching

from his window, Joel witnessed dozens of LLVs parade down Enterprise Street and past his house. Police and fire vehicles led the procession, sirens wailing. One by one, letter carriers stopped to deliver cards and greetings to Joel's special mailbox from their trucks. Joel's family, flanked by Beu, Serrato and neighbors and friends, stood in the snow next to Joel's mailbox. They greeted the letter carriers and other well-wishers. The pastor of their church led prayers for Joel and his family.

Later that evening, Joel passed away. He was 12 years old.

"I believe that it was God's timing," said Serrato, "that the Post Office got to present this to him while he was still alive."

"I think it made a tough time for his parents a little joyful," Beu said. "We didn't get the chance to have the kind of memories we would have liked with Joel," said Faith. "That gave us a great one."

Remembrance

"Joel was always in a great mood," Serrato remembered. At church, "he hugged everybody. That was kind

of special for everyone. Everyone misses that."

Faith treasured Joel's ability to make jokes. "It's kind of unusual for an autistic kid to have a sense of humor," she said, but "he always laughed and he always made us laugh so much." It was quite an achievement for a boy who took much longer than a typical child to learn to talk.

She also remembers his fast pace. "His personality was high energy." One way Faith would get Joel to do simple tasks, like putting on his seatbelt, was to make it a race, she said. "I know the first thing Joel is going to say when we get to heaven is, 'I beat you.'"

The following Friday, mourners overflowed Grace Evangelical Church to say goodbye to Joel. The mailbox that the letter carriers placed outside his home now stood next to his coffin. Joel's 29 first cousins filed past the mailbox to deliver more messages for him. Letter carriers from three area post offices turned out in their trucks for another parade—this time to honor Joel as part of his funeral procession.

At Bluff City Cemetery in Elgin, Joel Hasken, letter carrier, was buried in his uniform. ☒

The procession following the funeral service for Joel Hasken at Grace Evangelical Church in Elgin included dozens of LLVs and other postal vehicles.

Photo by Rick West, Daily Herald

