

Paralyzed man back in the driver's seat



Vancouver 'Quad Squad' helps him realize dream

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One of the Rons — Ron Phillips — refers to the vehicle as “the coolest wheelchair ever.”

The other one — Ron Heagy — calls it his “quad rod.”

The car in question is a 1968 Pontiac Firebird, which Ron Heagy used to take quite a joy ride Wednesday morning at Portland International Raceway.

The Salem, Ore., resident is paralyzed from the neck down. So for Heagy, driving means controlling the car with a joystick in his mouth.

The quadriplegic made several laps at PIR to earn an appearance on the Rose Cup schedule on June 14.

As he pulled to a stop after the final lap, Heagy was greeted by applause from the “Quad Squad” — a dozen or so employees at the Vancouver campus of SEH America who volunteered to support his effort.

That support started with Phillips, who provided the car.

“Without the Quad Squad, no way this would have come together,” Heagy said.

Another important participant was Rose Cup official Dan Halloran, who followed the Firebird around the track in a Mini Cooper to check out Heagy’s driving skills.

Halloran, regional executive of the Sports Car Club of America, declared Heagy up to the task of driving a victory lap in the specially equipped Firebird right before the Trans Am race. The goal was getting the Firebird ahead of the field as the pace car, but the Trans Am racers can’t run under 50 mph, and Heagy topped out at about 40 mph Tuesday.

Still, “It’s almost like going to the moon,” Heagy said later during a celebration at SEH America’s east Vancouver campus.

“This shows the world that any obstacle can be overcome,” Tatsuo Ito, SEH America executive vice president, said before presenting Heagy with a Firebird racing team jacket.

Heagy was paralyzed in a surfing accident 29 years ago. He hadn’t been behind the wheel — make that the driver’s seat — of a car until a month ago.

Heagy wound up in the Pontiac Firebird through a two-step connection with Ron Phillips. The Vancouver man does outreach work with kids in the county juvenile justice center, where Heagy has appeared as a motivational speaker.

So, when Heagy was booked for a speech in a Vancouver church, Phillips and SEH America colleague Michael Peters showed up.

“I mentioned that I’ve always wanted to drive something that goes more than 5 mph,” Heagy said. “Ron said, ‘I’ve got a Pontiac you can drive.’”

The car went into the Dignified Motors shop in Arizona, where it was fitted with a mouth-stick control system.

More work was done in the garage of Jay Delaney, another Quad Squad member.

It was a lot of basic engine and transmission stuff, but with some twists. Team member Ed Tolon had to remake the interior, Phillips said.

“Ed designed a custom seat. Ron is too tall, so Ed dropped the floor four inches.”

Other team members include Mike Tabor, Frank Belisle, Curt Buchanan, Dave Vickrey, Robert Withee, Nick Znaiden, Phil Lavine, and Russ Hill.

Heagy got his first chance to try it out a month ago in a parking lot. He took it out again two weeks ago on an abandoned street.

Then, on Wednesday, he ran several laps on the track: 25 mph, then 30, then 35, and finally 40.

For him, Heagy said, “Chin control is second nature. I’ve been driving a wheelchair with chin control for 29 years.”

Still, Heagy allowed, “The car was a little bit intimidating.”

The project is part of Heagy’s primary message as an author and motivational speaker.

“Let people know anything is possible,” he said.