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## The pit crew

*Caring kids steer classmates on road to success*

By CINDY STAUFFER Lancaster New Era

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**LANCASTER COUNTY, PA** - Park McKenna plays a tambourine for a musical group. She goes to chorus. She has library and gym.

The 11-year-old with the red hair and the freckled nose would go to recess too. But who has the time?

"She's verrrrry busy," says her nurse, Rebecca Heisey.

Some days it takes her 20 minutes just to grab lunch.

"The kids want to talk," Heisey said. "And it's just not one or two. It's everyone you pass!"

And she's not just active during the school day. Not too long ago, Park went to a roller skating party. She also had her friends over for pizza and a movie.

Park has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. She communicates in part with a device that has two large buttons she presses with a cheek, to signal yes or no or deliver pre-recorded messages.

Thanks to a group of kids called the Pit Crew, she leads a full life both in and out of her Intermediate Unit 13 classroom at J.E. Fritz Elementary School in the Conestoga Valley School District.

"Everyone in the sixth grade knows who Park is," says David Geyer, 11, one of those sixth-graders and a member of Park's Pit Crew.

The Pit Crew is a group of students who regularly meet over lunch and recess to plan activities that pull Park into the mainstream of school life.

It was the Crew that dreamed up ways Park could participate in the school's Track and Field Day. They planned her pizza party and got her involved in the musical group.

For their efforts, the Crew recently received the Education Award from the Arc of

Lancaster County, a group that advocates for children and adults who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Begun through an S. June Smith Center inclusionary program called Project Together, the Pit Crew is modeled on the concept of car racing.

Special-needs children are the drivers, and their Pit Crew figures out ways to support them, says Janiece Seldomridge of S. June.

Other Pit Crews operate in Blue Ball Elementary School and Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in New Holland.

St. Peter's Community Preschool in Manheim Township and The New School of Lancaster will be starting similar groups next year.

In its second year at Fritz, the Pit Crew has helped the school's students embrace the entire IU 13 class, whose room is just inside the front door.

"They used to walk around the kids, like (the disability) was catching," Heisey says. "Now the kids want to come in to talk."

Park's IU 13 teacher, Loris Grogan, now has 12 kids who take students from her class to gym. Another 30 take turns taking Grogan's students out for recess. One faithful trio comes every day to help the students on their buses.

In fact, so many kids want to help out, Mrs. Grogan had to make up a schedule. Everybody wins.

For Park, the Pit Crew has given her a slice of regular sixth-grade life.

"I just really wanted her to have friends in school," says Park's mom, Candie McKenna, of Manheim Township. "That's really hard for her to do if she's stuck in a classroom. I wanted her to be with kids her own age."

The real joy is that Park is special to her friends, but not, you know, "special."

She's a kid. One of them.

"I'll see her and I'll be like, 'Hey!' " says Danica Martino, a sixth-grader and Pit Crew member.

Park is perkier, smilier, more independent and enjoys school even more due to the program, say those around her.

Mrs. McKenna knew the program really was working when her telephone rang last summer. It was a Pit Crew member, wanting to talk to Park.

"She had never gotten a phone call," she says. "And this person called to talk to her. It was, 'Hey, how are you doing? I'm going to Disneyland. What are you doing?' " The Pit Crew kids say the program helps them, too.

Pit Crew member Jenna Sharpe, 11, has a 15-year-old sister who is in a wheelchair.

Pit Crew, she says, showed her there are other kids out there like her sister, and other kids out there like her.

Other kids have learned that kids like Park "are pretty much like us," she says, "but maybe they can't do things like us. That's our job — to help them do things."

The Pit Crew kids are upset that Park will not be going to Conestoga Valley Middle School with them. She'll be attending Manheim Central Middle School. The IU places students in schools based on need, enrollment and staffing, among other considerations.

A discussion breaks out. Topic A: Starting a Pit Crew at CV's middle school. Topic B: Kidnapping Park and bringing her to CV with them

Mrs. McKenna says the program's future stretches beyond the school's walls.

"These are kids who are going to make the laws and be the doctors and be the movers and shakers as Park gets older," she says. "If they can develop this empathy, that's great.

"We're not meant to be in our little pods. We all have to get out there and blend together."

CONTACT US: [cstauffer@LNPnews.com](mailto:cstauffer@LNPnews.com) or 481-6024