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FEATURED

Lifelong Pathfinder overcomes adversity to attend first Camporee

By JAKE GOODRICK * NEWS RECORD WRITER jgoodrick@gillettenewsrecord.net Aug 13, 2024



Vernon Norman and his wife Margaret Norman at Primrose Retirement Community on Friday in Gillette. Vernon, who has been a Pathfinder since he was 9, was granted a Wish of a Lifetime by AARP to come to his first ever International Pathfinder Camporee. Norman suffered a stroke that has left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and with expressive aphasia.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Vernon Norman sat in the passenger seat looking out toward the stream of children forming a line alongside the road.

The Pathfinder club from Southern California stood at attention, listening to the direction of their director, whose leadership role Vernon once held.

Despite first joining Pathfinders — a Seventh-day Adventist scout-like club — at age 9, more than 60 years ago, Vernon had once given up hope of ever making it to an International Pathfinder Camporee.

That all changed last week.

There he was, partially paralyzed from a stroke yet having traveled all the way from Huntsville, Alabama, to Gillette, in the heart of thousands of Pathfinders and campers whom he's always considered himself a part of.

With the Pathfinders in formation, their leader, Robert Harris, directed the Kansas Ave. Pathfinder Club from Riverside, California, to salute the man who founded their club.

"He told them, 'This is the man who started me in Pathfinders," said Margaret, Vernon's wife.

Together they raised their hands to their foreheads and followed their command.

It was a simple gesture, and one that carried a lifetime of meaning for the man who spent the majority of his life in the organization he hasn't been able to take part in for years.

Reliving the moment brings a flood of emotion to his face, a show of sincerity that speaks louder than words he could find himself. To see his eyes, conveying the clear meaning that moment and his time at Camporee held, puts a lump in your throat.

He paused before he softly spoke.

"It was — touching," he said.

That moment, Vernon said, made his whole trip worthwhile, a trip that he never thought possible.

"It was very rewarding," Margaret said. "That was the highlight of the week for him, to see that club at Camporee."



Margaret Norman, wife of Vernon Norman, speaks at Primrose Retirement Community on Friday in Gillette. Vernon, who has been a Pathfinder since he was 9, was granted a Wish of a Lifetime by AARP to come to his first ever International Pathfinder Camporee. Norman suffered a stroke that has left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and with expressive aphasia.

News Record Photo/Luke Johnson

Vernon had spent his life in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, raised three children as Pathfinders and earned master guide and leadership honors, allowing him to found a Pathfinder club.

That lifetime of commitment came together last week when he traveled from Alabama and reunited in Gillette with the California club he founded.

It was a moment he thought would never happen, and it was a moment made possible by Wish of a Lifetime by AARP, which works with older adults to fulfill dreams they never thought possible, with the hope of bringing a renewed sense of hope and optimism to their lives.

The organization paid for the Alabama couple's entire trip, and even flew their daughter Vernée into town to help them navigate the journey.

"It gave him something to live for, it gave him something to look forward to," Margaret said.

Getting to Camporee

For one reason or another, Norman had never been able to attend Camporee, which began in 1985 and has taken place nine times, including last week's event.

The couple had raised money to send their three children to the 2004 Camporee in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, but didn't have the funds for Norman to join.

"It was something I had to do as a parent," Vernon said. "You have to do it for your kids."

While attending a nightly performance — centerpiece to the event — last week, Norman said their daughter thanked him for sending her when she was a kid, 20 years ago.

That was a full-circle moment Vernon would have never thought possible when he had a stroke in 2016 that caused partial paralysis and expressive aphasia, which has made speaking difficult.

The longtime educator, marathon runner and orator had his life and health upended.

"After his stroke a marathon is walking from the bedroom to the car," Margaret said. "It could have taken him out in terms of the intensity of the stroke and the after effects."

The 2019 Camporee came and went. Then two years ago they began preparing for the journey in 2024, even though at the time they knew they couldn't afford it, and had no idea how, or even if, they would make it there.

"We were moving in faith," Margaret said. "If we sit still, the time will go by anyway and we'll still be in pain, so let's go. Let's exercise."

She had been going through her own health challenges, and realized that even if they could afford the journey, she would be in no shape to escort Vernon there. So together they began exercising, joining weekly groups and effectively training with Camporee in mind.

Then last spring their long-shot opportunity arrived.

Margaret was skimming through an AARP newsletter when she found out about Wish of a Lifetime. She told Vernon, who thought they had no shot, but she applied for it anyway.

Sure enough they heard back, and eventually it came time for Vernon to share what it would mean to have that wish come true. A few days after putting that answer in writing, they took the call that brightened their lives.

"We were both crying," Margaret said. "She says, 'Are you OK?' I said, 'We're just overwhelmed. We just can't talk.' He was crying so he couldn't even say anything. He was shocked. He was so shocked because he never expected that it would be granted."



Vernon Norman smiles at Primrose Retirement Community on Friday in Gillette. Vernon, who has been a Pathfinder since he was 9, was granted a Wish of a Lifetime by AARP to come to his first ever International Pathfinder Camporee. Norman suffered a stroke that has left him paralyzed on the right side of his body and with expressive aphasia.

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That news made possible the moment Vernon shared with the Pathfinder club he founded, and all the moments in between. Despite the event canceling its nightly performance for Saturday, and many heading home early due to weather concerns that never materialized, Vernon enjoyed every part of the trip he always imagined, but never thought possible.

"I've been to the mountain top and heaven now with the experience," he said.

It would have been easier to give up than maintain hope while aging through his recent years of health issues. But his perseverance was rewarded. Through it all, he took to heart the lessons of being thankful for what you have, rather than lamenting what you lack, and the significance of helping others — and accepting help — a sentiment laden through the Pathfinder ethos.

We all need something to live for. For Vernon, there's now the next Camporee in 2029.

"I would come back to Gillette, God willing," he said.

Wish of a Lifetime

To learn more about the program that brought Vernon Norman to his first International Pathfinder Camporee, visit wishofalifetime.org.

Jake Goodrick