



Firefighters help young boy dream for a day

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When Yvette Romero removed the blindfold from her 8-year-old son's face, his eyes lit up. Before him was a garage full of Redlands firefighters ready to help him realize his dream.

In 2003, doctors diagnosed Erick Romero with astrocytoma at age 1. The disease, a form of brain cancer, has left Erick with partial paralysis.

When Erick told a friend at school about his dream of becoming a firefighter, the friend told him that dream would never come true.

"(The friend) told Erick he could never become a firefighter because of his paralysis," said Armida Kersey, executive director for Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports families of children with cancer.

Erick's mother, Yvette, said the friend's comment dampened her little boy's spirit and hopes for the future.

"It kept with him," she said. "It sticks in his mind."

When Kersey caught wind of Erick's story, she passed it on to Redlands Fire Capt. Mike Howard.

"I thought, 'This isn't right,'" she said.

Howard and a group of firefighters working the day shift at Station 261 on Citrus Avenue on Thursday opened the station doors to Erick and made him an honorary firefighter.

"I was heartbroken when I heard his story," Howard said. "To me, he has enough to deal with and he should be able to live any kind of dream he wants to. The first thing that came to my head was, 'Let's make him a fireman.'"

Erick's parents drove him from their Riverside home to Station 261 wearing the blindfold. Firefighters greeted Erick and took him for a tour of the station before providing lunch for him and his parents.

The firefighters gave Erick a Redlands Fire Department T-shirt, a set of his own firefighter turnouts and a fire helmet to take home.

"I probably can't wear (the outfit) at school, but I will wear it at home," Erick said.

"He'll never take it off," Yvette added.

Erick rode in one of the department's fire engines as firefighters responded to a call. When they returned to the station, the firefighters let Erick shoot water from the engine's hose.

"I like (the hose) because you get to wet the fire," Erick said.

When Erick's parents first removed his blindfold,

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the boy didn't speak much. But by the end of his visit to Station 261, Erick was eager to talk about his experience.

"It was cool," he said. "I am a firefighter."

Many Redlands firefighters are involved with the Candlelighters organization. The Department is sponsoring a fundraiser for the group - the Lighting the Way Run/Walk scheduled for Nov. 22.

For more information on the Lighting the Way Run, visit www.candlelighters-socal.org or call (909)558-3419.

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