Written by Kelli Easterling of the Richmond County Daily Journal
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Four months ago, Sandhills Children's Center announced that it had received the most votes in the Toyota's 100 Cars for Good contest and won a new, handicap accessible Toyota minivan.

The van was delivered Tuesday morning amid much fanfare.

A parade procession, complete with lights and sirens, made its way from Griffin Toyota to Sandhills Children's Center.

"I think people thought we were a funeral procession coming through town," said Pat Campbell, Griffin Toyota associate.

Campbell was instrumental in getting the center involved in the national Toyota contest months ago.

"I have a son with cerebral palsy," said Campbell. "He was one of the first students to be enrolled at the center in Rockingham. When Toyota started this contest, I contacted Melanie Carnes and told her they should enter. They took it from there."

Contestants had to create and submit videos months ago, and the center was one of the finalists chosen.

"We started out as one contestant out of 5,000 entries across the nation," said Carnes, director of center services in Rockingham. "Then we made it to a finalist, which was one in 500. At that point, I don't think any of us dreamed we'd be standing here today with a new van for the children."

Once the center made it to the finalist stage, it was up to the public on Facebook to cast the winning votes.

"I got calls and emails from people in this community who didn't even know who we were or what we did, but who voted for us to win the van," said Carnes. "I'm so thankful to everyone who took the time to vote for us."

"People who didn't even have Facebook accounts created them just to vote for the center," said Clint Ray, Griffin Toyota general manager.

"We could not have done this without so much community support," said Carnes."I remember sitting at my computer at a few minutes until midnight on the day of the contest, looking at the votes and crying because I realized we were actually going to win."

The center previously shared its one handicap accessible van with the center in Southern Pines, and the new van will allow the Richmond County students more opportunities for trips and interactions in the community.

"The kids have been invited to decorate the Christmas tree at JCPenney next week, and I think that will be our first outing in the van," said Carnes.

"These children are a true blessing to everyone here," said Emily Tucker, Chamber of Commerce president. "God made these children special. I thank God for Sandhills Children's Center. My son didn't speak until he was four, and it happened at Sandhills Children's Center."

Others agreed that the center holds a special place in the hearts of many community members.

The center is a non-profit day school for young children with chronic illnesses, like Down Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy, sensory impairments and other developmental delays.

"We're so happy we could work in conjunction with Toyota and Sandhills Children's Center," said Mike Griffin, owner of Griffin Toyota. "The center is such a worthy organization and, most importantly, we're ecstatic for the children."

"We're simply overwhelmed and would like to thank the thousands who voted for us and everyone who turned out to help us celebrate today," said Center CEO Melanie Gayle.

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Read more: Richmond County Daily Journal - Griffin Toyota delivered new van to Children's Center