

illustrated



STAR POWER

**HOW DALE JR. IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE
IN KIDS' LIVES COAST TO COAST**

BY MICHAEL SOLENDER



JR Motorsports, the headquarters of Junior Nation, sits about 20 miles north of Charlotte. Obviously, the building serves as home to the No. 5 and No. 7 Nationwide Series teams. But it's also the hub of the official licensing operation and, naturally, all of the Dale Earnhardt Jr. merchandise a fan could want sits just inside the main entrance (it is overseen by a life-size replica of Junior himself that was retired from a wax museum).

But upstairs, tucked near the end of a long hallway, is an office that isn't included in the shop tours that JR Motorsports hosts on Thursdays and Fridays. Nevertheless, it is home to one of the most vital arms of Earnhardt's enterprise. The small, unassuming office isn't crowded with trophies or racing memorabilia. Instead, its walls are covered with thank-you notes, most bearing the handwriting of children.

Photos: Courtesy The Dale Jr. Foundation



WIN Dale Jr.'s Ride

Visitors to The Dale Jr. Foundation website will find links to special commemorative clothing, collectibles, accessories and online auctions that include more obscure items, such as a drum set that was once owned by Junior.

A trip to WinDaleJrsRide.com yields a chance at perhaps the most desirable possession of all — his ride. Well, OK, it may not actually be his car, but it is a 2013 Chevrolet Corvette Grand Sport that is completely loaded the way Junior likes it.

Held annually for the past several years, this fundraiser proves very popular with the fans and is a great way to bring recognition — something Earnhardt shies away from — to TDJF and the remarkable work they do.

"If the foundation can provide inspiration and motivation for others to support people in need, well, that is something that is very satisfying and rewarding," Earnhardt said. "For me, what I get back from this work is hard to put into words. It's simply immeasurable."

Want to know more?

The Dale Jr. Foundation:
TheDaleJrFoundation.org

Win Dale Jr.'s Ride:
WinDaleJrsRide.com

This is the headquarters of The Dale Jr. Foundation, where lives are touched each and every day.

The foundation was established in 2007 as a way to consolidate the philanthropic efforts of Junior and JR Motorsports.

The filing cabinets in The Dale Jr. Foundation office groan with thank-you notes and special cards of acknowledgement from literally hundreds of children whose lives Earnhardt has touched in both small and very large ways.

Since the inception of TDJF, the organization has donated more than \$1.2 million (and another \$400,000 through in-kind

donations) to the benefit of tens of thousands of children, who are the primary focus of the organization.

WISH UPON A STAR

Among the treasures in the office is a custom book featuring a young man in a wheelchair on the cover. He's seated in front of the entrance to Charlotte Motor Speedway and the book is simply titled "Shawn's Make-A-Wish — NASCAR All-Star Weekend May 13-18, 2009."

Inside is a heartwarming photoessay of Shawn's Make-A-Wish experience, with the

clear highlight being his time spent at JR Motorsports, touring the facility and meeting and spending time with his hero, Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Over 222 children facing serious illnesses have been able to spend time with Earnhardt through Make-A-Wish — making him the fourth-most prolific wish-granting athlete in the country. Although the foundation helps children in need in many different ways, Make-A-Wish receives the lion's share of Junior's time.

"Dale Jr. is one of our top wish-granters, having granted the wishes of several hundred children," said Amy Brindley, president

and CEO of Make-A-Wish of central and western North Carolina. "He is simply tireless in his support of our children, and I know he finds it incredibly humbling that kids facing life-threatening illness choose to spend time with him as their wish. He truly is special in the way he connects with these kids."

As the biggest star in NASCAR, Earnhardt's schedule is packed solid week in and week out. But he makes time for the Make-A-Wish kids.

"Make-A-Wish has always been important to me," Earnhardt said. "We've done a lot of Make-A-Wish meet-and-greets over

the years, and I enjoy meeting the kids and the families. We mostly do it at the track on weekends because it makes the overall experience for the kid that much cooler — you know, they get to watch the race and meet other drivers and get treated really well.

"It means a lot to me to know they get that whole experience, and Make-A-Wish does a really nice job with that."

And the child isn't the only one getting a boost from the meetings.

"During a race week, things can get intense," Earnhardt said. "You try and look at the smallest things to get more out of your car and manage through the pressures

Photos: Courtesy The Dale Jr. Foundation



of performing. There are a million things on your mind and they all compete for attention. When I have the chance to meet one of the Make-A-Wish kids and spend some time with them, a whole different perspective washes over me. I come back and focus on what is really important. It is truly humbling and rewarding to be part of their lives."

PURPOSEFUL GIVING

No matter how many wishes he can grant, though, Earnhardt's time for one-on-one meetings is inherently limited. That's where the foundation comes in.

"We know there are kids in need all across the U.S. and while we support national organizations and recognize the needs of folks across the country, we are very deliberate and focused on supporting communities where we grew up and live today," Earnhardt's sister and JRM co-owner Kelley Earnhardt Miller said.

Junior said when he established the foundation in 2007, he was unsure as to the intricacies and nuances involved. He wanted to be certain his charitable giving was done in a way that would maximize its impact. He relied on Kelley to help ensure that in creating TDJF, the charitable giving would be

done in a structured and meaningful way.

"By establishing a nonprofit, we are able to structure our charitable giving and also give the ability to our many fans and supporters to join in with helping causes that are important to Dale Jr.," Earnhardt Miller said. "We wanted to be very strategic, which is why our mission is dedicated to giving underprivileged individuals, with focus on youth, the resources to improve their confidence and education and the opportunity to achieve extraordinary goals."

Over 73 percent of TDJF support has been directed to charities in North Carolina. One such local recipient is Shepherd Elementary School in Mooresville. Part of the Iredell-Statesville School System, Shepherd has received support from TDJF in a number of ways through the years.

Julia Stikeleather, Shepherd's principal, said the foundation's support has made an incredible difference.

"The Dale Jr. Foundation has given us significant donations which have enabled us to create a computer lab, equip all our classrooms with smart-boards and help develop our science lab," Stikeleather said. "There is absolutely no way we'd be this competitive and be able to offer our children this level of technology exposure

without the support of TDJF. We are very grateful and appreciative."

TDJF is also supporting the Blessings in a Backpack program at the school. Underprivileged children are provided with backpacks filled with food for the weekend for when they aren't receiving meals and snacks at school. This program alone reaches more than 120 children at Shepherd and TDJF has committed to its support for the next three years.

Other N.C. organizations TDJF supports include: the Ronald McDonald House of Charlotte, Camp Luck, Barium Springs Home for Children, Ace and TJ's Grin Kids and Boys and Girls Clubs.

"Our fans continue to be a source of inspiration for us and are always asking how they can support the causes that we believe in," Earnhardt Miller said. "I'm proud of what we've done in the six years that we've had The Dale Jr. Foundation. You know, it's one of those deals that becomes more and more significant to you with each passing year. At first, I probably didn't know a whole lot about having a foundation and what all it meant.

"But as you go along and see the impact — especially with kids — it has some kind of effect on you. Now I can't really imagine my life without it." **N**

Three Rings Of TDJF Influence

Here are a few examples of how The Dale Jr. Foundation focuses its giving on the local, regional and national levels.



Exception To The Rule

This illustration shows all of Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s Make-A-Wish meet-and-greets from 2010 to press time. Out of 24 different events, though, there is one obvious geographical outlier. All but one of the Make-A-Wish events happened at race tracks. The meeting in Galveston, Texas, was one of those rare instances in which the planets aligned and Earnhardt visited a child in his hometown this past February.

"Occasionally we get a call from Make-A-Wish that a kid can't travel or something's come up, and that's really tough," Earnhardt said. "You wish there's something you could do. The schedule makes it really hard. But in this case, we were heading out to Phoenix for a Winner's Circle appearance, and Texas is on the way. I was able to stop off and visit him. It usually doesn't work out that way, but I was glad it did. I enjoyed hanging out with him."

