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Wish granted

*By Leigh Ann Wagner Kroening
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When Gayle Krueger thinks back nine years ago to the day she found out her son has a terminal illness, she has to fight to control her emotions. What was supposed to be a routine checkup for then-18-month-old Brandon turned into her worst nightmare.

"I stopped back at the doctor's office to get the results of the tests he had decided to run, and that's when he told me Brandon has Duchenne muscular dystrophy," Krueger said. "He said most kids are in a wheelchair by the time they're 9, and most of them die in their teens."

Determined to give Brandon as normal a life as possible, Krueger and her husband, Ervin, went through with plans to adopt their foster son, and he's now one of the couple's eight children — six of whom are adopted and three of whom have special needs.

Until recently, Gayle Krueger has had a difficult time accepting help from county and state organizations that have offered it to the family.

"To me, nobody owes me anything," she said. "I made the choice to adopt these six kids, and I don't need any form of payment to take care of them. I don't feel comfortable asking for help or accepting help."

But a television commercial changed her way of thinking and made the entire family's summer a little brighter. The commercial was for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and it immediately made Krueger think of Brandon.

"He's the most loving boy there is," Krueger said. "He always has a smile on his face. He's a very happy kid."

He's also continuing to defy the odds. At 10½ years old, Brandon still walks without the aid of crutches or braces, though he does have a wheelchair for longer distances. In a few weeks, he'll start fifth grade with the rest of his peers at Algoma Elementary School.

But there is one thing that Brandon hasn't been able to do. Because his nerves and muscles are very sensitive to hot and cold, Brandon hasn't been able to swim in his family's pool. So when Make-A-Wish came to interview him for his wish, Brandon was ready.

"I drew the pool that I wanted," Brandon said. "It's gray and has a liner with fish on the sides and sand on the bottom. It has a wheelchair ramp. It's heated and has steps that I can sit on inside the pool."

Jim Mastick, a volunteer wish granter with the Wisconsin chapter of Make-A-Wish, said making Brandon's wish a reality was a challenge he was ready to accept. After meeting with Brandon, the group of wish granters worked with a pool company in Appleton to nail down the boy's specific needs and wants for the above-ground swimming pool.

"These families go through so much," Mastick said. "When we get involved, we get to make what they're going through just a little bit easier."

Mastick said Brandon's pool is one of more than 100 wishes that will be granted in the state this year. The wishes are made possible through private donations and corporate sponsorships.

The pool was completed a few weeks ago, and despite some recent chilly weather, Brandon and his

siblings have made use of it already, Krueger said.

"I can't say enough kind things about Make-A-Wish," she said. "For one summer, they made us feel like kings and queens. They made us feel special. Make-A-Wish would give us the sun, the moon and the stars if they could."
