

PATHWAYS

500 Festival Princesses

By Chris Howell

May 4, 2009

You don't have to be a hard-core race fan to know that the month of May means that the big race is just around the corner.

The Indianapolis 500 attracts fans young and old from all over the world to our quiet little state.

For the kids at the Children's Village near Ellettsville, the celebration started a couple of weeks ago.

They were preparing for a visit from a few of the 500 Festival princesses, and teachers changed their curriculums to give the youngsters a glimpse into the history of the race.

"Why don't we have the kids build cars?" director Cheryl Duffield said.

"The teachers all put this into their lesson plans for probably about the last two weeks," she said.

They made cars from recycled cardboard boxes and decorated them with paper plate wheels and finger paint. They even raced them around the gym for their guests.

The development and education center works with children from 6 weeks to 5 years old, and pretty much everyone who could walk was getting involved in some fashion.

Annie Berning, one of this year's 500 Festival princesses, works part time at the center and organized the event.

"I grew up around it since I was little," she said.

Berning's family has been Indy 500 race fans since her grandfather came home from World War II.

"He kind of instilled this love for the city and for the Speedway in all of us," she said.

Berning, who is graduating from Indiana University this weekend, and three other princesses from IU, Sara Stombaugh, Kati Detty and Nicole Pollard, all dressed in their high heels and sashes and staged races with the kids and their cardboard cars. After the races, the kids got the chance to have their pictures taken with one of the 33 Corvette pace cars.

"This is an example of the outreach we do," Berning said.

"With the youth ... the actual happenings and workings of the festival aren't applicable to them," she said. "So we just make it fun, and we come here to represent the Speedway."



Two-and-a-half-year-old Rylee Merida looks up at Cheryl Duffield, director of Children's Village, as she puts a "Future Indy 500 Princess" sash on her for the parade the preschool had Thursday for four visiting 500 Festival princesses.