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## Special wheelchair would be a big boost for young boy

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CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Elin Mena Jr., 10, smiles as his mother, Maria Mena, 36, places her head on the side of his face on Tuesday, December 6, 2011 in Miami, Florida. The Mena family is in dire need of a wheelchair and a special ramp for their SUV that would allow the wheelchair to be stored in the rear of the vehicle.

Elin Mena Jr., a smiley third-grader at Maya Angelou Elementary, appreciates a challenge, whether it's in his favorite subject — math — or going to therapy three times a week after an illness put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

His father, Elin Sr., also faces a challenge — bench-pressing his 10-year-old son's wheelchair to the top of the family's SUV and then climbing up to secure it every time the family, including mother Maria, 36, and younger brother, Riddick, 5, leave their Allapattah home.

"It's a lot of trouble," said Mena.

"I can't trust him to a baby sitter," explained Maria, whose older son usually communicates nonverbally through a series of head and arm movements.

A wheelchair carrier ramp that attaches to the back of the car would help solve at least this challenge for the family. Children's Medical Services, which handles Elin's case, nominated him for The Herald's Holiday Wish Book, saying, "the family is needy and Medicaid won't pay" for the carrier.

When Elin was barely 3 years old, his parents, who lived near Chicago at the time, took him to a hospital with a high fever. On two separate visits the hospital staff advised the young parents that Elin probably had a virus and sent them home with directions to give the boy Motrin for the next three days.

"That last time his brain was affected," Mena said sadly. Elin's fever eventually subsided, but he immediately began acting like "a newborn."

"The doctors I took him to at first told me he was probably just fatigued from having had a fever for so long," recounted Maria. "But I wasn't satisfied." Noticing that her son could no longer sit up and napped excessively, the young mother sought a second opinion.

“The [new] doctor told me he’d suffered cerebral paralysis,” she said, shaking her head. “His motor skills were badly affected.”

Elin has had continuous physical, occupational and speech therapy ever since.

After spending approximately six hours a day at school in his wheelchair, Elin’s therapists don’t think he’s spending enough time stretching out his legs.

“His tendons are shrinking because there is no way for him to stand at school,” explained Maria. “So he just can’t grow.”

For now, Elin’s parents feel lucky to have had a second-hand “stander,” a strange-looking medical device to which Elin can be strapped upright when he comes home from school. It was donated to them so their son can stretch his legs.

A wheelchair carrier for the car would definitely make life easier, but what the Menas really hope for one day is to get Elin a special new wheelchair recommended by his therapist.

The C400 VS, a rehab chair sold by Permobil, would give Elin the freedom to recline, lie all the way back and most importantly, stand without help, even while at school. The parents believe this type of chair would “empower” their young son.

“His school lent him a small electric wheelchair once and he felt so independent,” said Maria as her boy sat next to her smiling and waving his arms at the memory. “He was assigned to turn the lights on and off in class because he could elevate the chair.”

The challenge is the cost. Mena, who has been able to find work sporadically for the past six months, said the family has saved \$500. But according to the company, the average retail cost of the C400VS is \$38,000. Rudy Eljaiek, the regional manager in South Florida, said in an email that he was glad that Wish Book is trying to help the child.

“We don’t want a lot,” said Maria, “but at least a carrier.”

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