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EDITORIAL

Adaptive Driving Experience on Unique Mission for Vets

By [Mary Jo Buchanan](#) | October 7, 2015

While many enjoy the driving or ride-along experiences offered at NASCAR tracks all over the country, there are those who have served their country and are unable to get into a racecar, let alone drive it because of their disability.

Adaptive Driving Experience, a nonprofit organization based out of New Jersey, is on a mission to change that. They are in the process of raising funds for a brand new adapted car that will allow wounded military, police and fire veterans to get behind the wheel and on track for the thrill of a lifetime.

Adaptive Driving Experience, previously known as Accessible Racing, is celebrating their name change and rebranding with the building of an entirely new racecar that will be adapted for any veteran with any type of physical challenge.

“Since the beginning of the year we decided to shake things up a bit and restructured our Board of Directors,” Danny Chrissanthis, Board Member and Director, said. “I stepped in in a leadership role. And with the name change, we decided that a new car was in order.

“We were able to find a car, which was a challenge in and of itself. We ran into Brad Keselowski at PRI in December and we discussed some options. He put me in touch with his brother Brian, who had a chassis that he was willing to part with. It was a Gen-6 Toyota Camry COT chassis that he ran the Daytona 500 with in 2013. He had that car built as a show car, with a Sprint Cup body but that deal fell through. We made an arrangement to purchase that chassis, so all it needs is an engine and a transmission and a few other goodies. It was exactly what we were looking for. Brian gave us an excellent deal so I like to give him as much credit as I can for doing that.”

After overcoming the first hurdle of locating a vehicle that could be modified, the next hurdle of raising the dollars needed to adapt the car had to be met.

“We went down to Mooresville and picked the chassis up in June,” Chrissanthis said. “And we have since held a fundraiser, an on-line crowd fundraising effort. We have several manufacturers stepping up and donating parts to the car. That is where we are at right now.

“The CrowdRise fundraising effort has a goal of \$15,000. That gets us a motor, transmission and some of the finishing touches. It also gets the car ready to go somewhere. It doesn’t pay off all the bills but it is realistic.”

While the major focus is on raising the funds to get the car in order, Chrissanthis and the Board have bigger dreams in mind for the future.

“Right now, besides making the car run and getting it adapted, we need to make the car look pretty. We want to attract potential marketers and corporate partners. This is going to be a beautiful car. One of our goals besides doing on track events is displaying the car representing different companies so we can grow the awareness and collect funds to expand.”

One of the major goals of Adaptive Driving Experience is to enable the driver to have a racecar experience, behind the wheel and in race conditions. To do that, the car itself must be adapted in several different ways.

“Our car has a door, which is different from a racecar that you see on track in NASCAR’s Sprint Cup Series,” Chrissanthis said. “The driver’s seat swivels around ninety degrees. That allows for someone in a wheelchair to transfer into the driver’s seat.

“We have special controls that can be changed very quickly to accommodate a variety of disabilities. As long as they can steer the car with one hand, they can drive. We’ve had paraplegics and quadriplegics in the car. Once they get strapped in, on the right side of the car we actually have a race car driver. He has his own steering wheel and his own gas and brake. So, he can actually control the vehicle. Once the car goes out on the track, our driver is taking them out there. They’ve done some pre-driving training and then they get to take over the wheel.

“They drive the car and they get to do ten or fifteen laps. When they’ve decided they have had enough, they let go of the wheel and our driver takes over and gives them hot laps. So, they actually get two experiences in one, which no one else offers.

“I don’t know of anyone else on the planet that offers this type of experience. I know that in the past there have been cars set up for ride-alongs for disabled veterans to get in the passenger side. We know that there have been many cars modified for drivers to go out and race. I don’t know anyone offering what we’re offering and at no cost to the drivers.

We will raise money and have multiple programs available so that not only our veterans that have been injured in the line of duty can participate but also those in the police and fire service.”

For Chrissanthis and the other Board members of Adaptive Driving Experience, this effort is a labor of love, from dedication to helping veterans to sharing the love of racing.

“My background is that I’m a project manager and work for one of the largest telecommunications construction companies in the country,” Chrissanthis said. “My passion is definitely being involved in the behind the scenes action of NASCAR.

“I love everything it takes to put on a race and I love the people of racing. When I first met the individual that started this organization, I thought this was what I was destined for. It was involving a race car but also helping veterans with disabilities accomplish something that was not being offered anywhere else.

“The idea of it alone really excited me. The first time I went to do an event with them, I was hands on right away. And I was able to see the reactions of the drivers as they got out of the car. The way they talked about it and the excitement is just unbeatable. The comradery that takes place between the drivers is amazing. The way they cheered each other on was amazing and it was the most fun we ever had in a race car.”

In addition to Chrissanthis’ passion, the rest of the Board also brings their own sets of special skills to the organization.

“The gentleman who is the President of our organization, Peter Ruprecht, owns a company called Drive-Master,” Chrissanthis said. “They are a family-owned business based out of New Jersey and they have developed, patented and installed adaptive equipment for vehicles. They also have a nationwide and worldwide network. Peter built our first car and he has adapted race cars for drivers for their use. And he will build our next car.”

While the funds are being raised and the car is being built, Chrissanthis is searching for support from any veterans group or from those who just love racing. And whether funding or raising awareness, Chrissanthis welcomes any and all involvement.

“The way to get involved is to stay connected to us and we will post everything that is happening. We want to get an email list together,” Chrissanthis said. “The way that many of the events will take place will be through particular groups, such as veteran organizations to anybody who wants to sign up.

“All of our fundraising is through the website and Facebook. There are huge ‘donate now’ buttons on everything. Any amount is not too small and it certainly helps. If they can’t afford to donate, they can like us on Facebook and help spread the word.”

With the number of veterans with disabilities growing, Chrissanthis feels strongly that the time is now to get the car adapted and on the race track.

“The importance of this grows every day,” Chrissanthis said. “The more people I talk to, the more excited they get and the more excited I get. Just being able to help people is exciting.

“I love being around race cars and I love being able to help anyone I can. I don’t have a Bill Gates bank account so I can’t give out money. But what I can do is get this organization off the ground and get as many people as possible to drive the car.”

For more information about Adaptive Driving Experience, you can visit their [website](#) or [Facebook](#) page.

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Mary Jo Buchanan

Mary Jo Buchanan has been a race fan since her childhood, having grown up at a local Pennsylvania dirt track. With her experience in the pits, she has developed an interest and expertise in all levels of racing, from the local scene to the highest level of the sport. Many of her articles focus on the ‘behind the scenes’ and sometimes ‘off the beaten path’ stories about the world of racing. Buchanan also enjoys writing about up and coming drivers and the people that make NASCAR work on a daily basis.