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Joaquin Valencia, 9, rides with PE teacher Sally Pickett on a new bicycle. The donated bike will allow Joaquin, who is blind, to compete in a triathlon. AARON ROP/THE REPUBLIC

Thanks to donated bike, blind student can race

Aaron Rop

The Republic • azcentral.com

For 9-year-old Joaquin Valencia, life is about facing more challenges than your average kid. He was diagnosed with retinoblastoma at 1½ months old and became completely blind at 6 months old.

But thanks to Team Asa, he will get to face the next challenge of his young life with a smile on his face and a helmet on his head. Team Asa is a non-profit organization that provides financial support for children and adults with physical and/or intellectual disabilities.

"He has no fear," Aguilar Elementary School Principal JoLyn Gibbons said. "You'll look at him and say, 'He's not blind.'"

Joaquin, now in fourth grade, was given a tandem bicycle by Team Asa as a surprise last week to help him fulfill his goal of competing in Aguilar Elementary's fifth-grade triathlon in the fall, weeks before 2014's Ironman Arizona.

Joaquin gathered with almost 545 of his school peers for their regular Fit Friday assembly in the gym, unaware of what would happen. He says he knew that Team Asa was going to donate a tandem bike to the Tempe Elementary

Adapted PE Program that he and Sally Pickett, the Tempe Adapted PE teacher, could ride at school, but he didn't expect that he would get to take one home to practice on with his mom.

"I'm so glad you could help out," Joaquin told Team Asa's Denise Rentschler after the gym emptied out.

Joaquin's mother, Monique Hernandez, said, "Over the weekend, he's been really excited and bugging kids around the neighborhood to ride bikes with him." She added that being able to ride with him is much easier than directing him on his three-wheeled bike.

Principal Gibbons says that Aguilar Elementary, 5800 S. Forest Ave., has been doing the Aguilar Kids Triathlon for about two years now as part of its fitness focus. A group of 10 fifth graders get to participate in the triathlon every spring and fall thanks to bike donations made by Arizona's Chances for Children.

Gibbons said the school had a running club because "everyone can run" and it didn't require additional equipment expenses from students. But Chances encouraged them to take it a step further.

The triathlon is held at Kiwanis Park,

See **TANDEM BIKE**, Page 13

BRIEFS

Camp for kids with ailment

Children with respiratory health issues are invited to go to camp at Jackpot Ranch in Camp Verde. The Camp Soaring Eagle Foundation will offer the respiratory camper weekend on Friday, April 25, to Sunday, April 27. The medically supervised excursion will feature horseback riding, fishing, paddle boats, arts and crafts, and archery.

This camping trip is free, and complimentary transportation will be provided at Cardon Children's Medical Center. Campers must be patients who suffer from a respiratory illness or asthma, and this experience is open to children across Arizona ages 6 to 15 years.

To apply call Juan Morales, executive director of camp operations, at 928-284-2197 or morales@campsoaringeagle.org.

Pet shelter grand opening

Lost Our Home Pet Foundation, the Valley's only no-kill shelter dedicated to the rescue of dogs and cats found in abandoned and foreclosed homes, will host the grand opening of its new facility

from noon-4 p.m. Saturday, April 5 at 2323 S. Hardy Drive in Tempe.

In addition to a ribbon-cutting ceremony the day will feature a food truck, cat tree trunk show, pet adoptions, tours of the facility and a photographer with studio setup for attendees who want their pets photographed.

Information: lostourhome.org.

Earth Day soccer classic

The first bi-continental Earth Day soccer classic, Kick It! With Africa, is 8 a.m.-9 p.m., Saturday, April 12, on the intramural fields of Arizona State University's Tempe campus.

This family-friendly, all-day tournament is made possible by ASU's School of Sustainability and charitable partners, including *Green Living* magazine, One World Futbol, Sun Devil Fitness Complex and Tempe Sister Cities.

ASU student Mariama Salifu is helping to plan the tournament in Tempe, while her brother, Shafic Osman, is planning the tournament in Accra, Ghana. As teams take the fields in Tempe, schoolchildren in Accra will play on a plot lit by solar technology.

Information: sustainability.asu.edu/events/rsvp/earthday-soccer.

TANDEM BIKE

Continued from Page 12

and the participating students practice twice a week throughout the school year.

Joaquin said he became interested in doing the triathlon because he enjoys running and swimming, as well as riding his scooter and roller blades, so improving his bicycling was the next step.

"When he told me (he wanted to do the triathlon), I said, 'Oh that's interesting. Do you know how to swim?'" said Sally Picket, one of Tempe Elementary School District's Adapted PE instructors. "He said 'No, I'm afraid of the water.' And I'm like, 'Well that's going to be a little hard to do a triathlon if you can't swim.' So last summer, he and I met at the Virginia G. Piper Sports and Fitness Center and I taught him how to swim."

Picket, named the Arizona Health and Physical Education Adaptive PE Teacher of the Year, according to tempeschools.org, said Joaquin learned to swim in two days and can do 15 to 16 laps on his own.

She has been teaching him since kindergarten and said she was surprised but happy when he asked her about the triathlon. She contacted the Suzy Foundation, which hosted Tempe's Adapted Adventure Day last weekend, and it got her in touch with Team Asa.

“When he told me (he wanted to do the triathlon), I said, 'Oh that's interesting. Do you know how to swim?' ”

SALLY PICKET

PE teacher who works with Joaquin Valencia, who is blind

"The two days a week here at school when Miss Sally comes and teaches him and works with him is awesome, but for him to really do it and feel comfortable, you can feel that from him, he wants to be confident and comfortable with his peers, he needed one for home," Rentschler, of Team Asa's, said. "This is right up Team Asa's alley; this is something we were looking for."

Rentschler said funds for the two tandem bicycles, purchased at Tempe Bicycle, came from Team Asa's Polar Plunge in January, where more than \$7,000 was raised, and Kate Baldanza's Freedom Bear Plunge & 5K in Afghanistan. Baldanza came back from Afghanistan four days before Joaquin received his bike and was able to help present the award with Rentschler.

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