

# Suburban News

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## Churchville's Chalmers pushing across the U.S

by Terra Osterling

When Churchville native and Paralympic athlete Ryan Chalmers placed his hands on the rims of his racing wheelchair on April 6, he reflected on the two years that he and his Push Across America team had spent preparing for his 71 day and 3,300 mile journey from Los Angeles to New York City.

"At the start in LA, I thought: I don't want to let anyone down, I want to give it everything I've got to make it a success," Ryan said via cell phone on day 47 of Push Across America. He had pushed 71 miles that day - the equivalent of nearly three marathons - partly with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign track team, his alma mater.

Ryan, an elite track and field athlete and member of the 2012 London Paralympics Team USA, is pushing his racer across America to raise awareness for the capabilities of disabled youth and young adults. Ryan and Roger Muller, founder of Stay Focused, wanted to stage an event for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Muller's organization.

Stay Focused provides growth and leadership-development opportunities for disabled youth through a Grand Cayman-based SCUBA certification and mentoring program. Ryan, born with spina bifida, was himself a Stay Focused mentee, and is now a mentor and a PADI-certified Dive Master.



Day 16, mile 33 of a 55 mile day on the way to Page, AZ. Ryan's "punching gloves" cover his index finger and thumb to offer some protection, but blisters and scrapes are inevitable. Just outside of this shot, Ryan's support team leads and follows, transporting extra tires, an extra racer, and anything else Ryan might need on the road. The whole family plans to be there for Ryan's New York City finish, near Central Park, on June 15th. Photographs by: Parker Feierbach.

pbachphotography.com



Photographs by: Parker Feierbach pbachphotography.com

Above: Day 25, mile 54 of a 65 mile day into Walsenburg, CO, through La Veta Pass. Right: Day 47, mile 20, of a 71 mile day pushing into Champaign, IL, with the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, track team. GoPro, a Push Across America sponsor, donated an action camera, used by extreme athletes, to record Ryan's push. The camera is mounted on the front of Ryan's bike.



Ryan began training for Push Across America after the 2012 Paralympics. To prepare for the altitude of the Rockies, Ryan wore a bandanna over his nose and mouth while pushing up the ramps at the U of I stadium.

He pushes a racing wheelchair in a well-practiced "punching" technique. While a conventional wheelchair is powered by pulling wheel rim bars back-to-front, racers are powered when the rubber-coated rim bars are grabbed in downward "punches."

For Push Across America, Ryan begins at 6:30 a.m., when his biggest fan and sister Emily sends her daily text message, breaks for lunch, then usually stops for the day at dinner time. "He's going an average of 10 mph, an average of 60 to 70 miles per day - some nights until 8 p.m. because he's going three mph uphill, but needs to make the goal," says Gregg Chalmers, Ryan's father.

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**Ryan Chalmers**, Day 16, mile 26 of a 59 mile day heading into Cedar City, UT, just after a snowstorm. Photo by: Parker Feierbach  
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## Churchville's Chalmers pushing across the U.S

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Bob deNormand, Ryan's grandfather, says, "It's not really speed work unless you're going downhill – and he did do 53 mph going downhill," – "Once!" add Gregg and Linda, Ryan's mother. Ryan's racer, made and donated by Top End, is equipped with an emergency brake, but he prefers not to use it once he has built up momentum.

The Push Across America team caravan is made up of an RV equipped for documentary filmmakers, the lead vehicle, and the support van with this bumper sticker: "Slow moving vehicle – fast moving Paralympian." Together they travel the professionally designed cross-country course.

Ryan has been on many teams, including Rochester Rookies track and Rochester Rockets junior wheelchair basketball. Track took him to the 2005 Junior World Games in Australia, where Ryan filled in on the basketball team at the coach's request. That team earned a gold

medal and Ryan was later recruited by U of I for their wheelchair basketball team. But track is his first love, and the way Ryan now promotes his message of setting and accomplishing goals.

Fran deNormand recalls her grandson pushing his racer the approximately one mile loop of Burnt Mill Road, where Ryan grew up two doors down. He would pause at her mailbox, but refused to stop for water until he finished 20 laps around.

Asked what he would tell his hometown supporters now, Ryan says, "As long as you are passionate and set goals for yourself, you can accomplish anything. Churchville is an incredible place – it's the place that made me who I am today."

Ryan Chalmers will complete Push Across America in New York City on Saturday, June 15. Follow Ryan's progress @PushUSA on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Donate at PushAcross-America.org.

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# Cross country journey tallies 3,321 miles - push by push

by Terra Osterling

Churchville native Ryan Chalmers had two miles to go to complete his Push Across America on June 15, but the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, one of three in New York City that Chalmers had to cross to get to his finish line, doesn't allow non-motorized vehicles.



**Ryan Chalmers** a motorcade blocks traffic, motorists get upset, but people were actually getting out of their cars and waving as they passed by," says Ryan's father, Gregg Chalmers.

"Throughout the Push, we had a lot of instances of good luck, and this was one of them," says Chalmers of how the NYPD was able to make it as safe as possible for him to cross, guaranteeing that he could push every single mile of his 3,321 mile journey.

The NYPD then closed off side streets as Chalmers made his way to Central Park. "Normally when

Pushing for 71 consecutive days was something Ryan Chalmers was able to do because, he says, he knew why he was doing it.

Chalmers pushed his wheelchair racer across America to raise awareness about the capabilities of disabled youth and young adults, specifically to benefit Stay-Focused Inc. and Rochester SportsNet, and all adaptive and would-be adaptive sport athletes.

Chalmers says, "People have the 'what' in mind, and others can help with the 'how,' but it's really the 'why' – that reason that helps you accomplish your goal."

Chalmers' support team for the Push included trainer Karla Wessels of the University of Illinois, who monitored nutrition and his physical condition. Roger Muller, founder of Stay-Focused, drove a support vehicle behind (and protecting) Chalmers. Photographer Parker Feierbach also managed the route.

Aaron Pike, himself a Paralympic wheelchair athlete, kept Chalmers' racer in top condition. Corey Pike, Aaron's brother, maintained and drove the RV. Chalmers also calls Corey the Team Optimist.



Though Ryan can't walk, he does use leg braces that allow him to stand if he supports himself with something. As shown above, Ryan puts away his leg braces prior to preparing for a final day's Push into Manhattan, New York from Highland Park, New Jersey. Photo by Parker Feierbach.



Ryan pushes over the Verrazano Bridge into Brooklyn from Staten Island, only one borough away from Manhattan. Photo by Parker Feierbach.

"Every time I complained I had to climb for four hours, he'd say, 'at least you didn't just climb for five hours,'" recalls Chalmers. During steep climbs, Corey would walk alongside while carrying a large rock on his shoulder, or run ahead and do push-ups until Chalmers passed.

"You can't train for this 100%," says Chalmers, "but you want to be 100% recovered at the (daily) starting line ... you anticipate, you adapt, and you push through the fatigue – which does kick in after 2,500 miles."

A crowd of family and friends, and representatives from Mayor Bloomberg's office, met Chalmers at the finish in Central Park.

A week later, he was in France watching the Le Mans 24 hour race at the invitation of a driver he met in Kansas City. And on June 27, Ryan Chalmers was welcomed home at Frontier Field, receiving commendations from the State of New York, the County of Monroe, the City of Rochester, the Town of Riga, and the key to the Village of Churchville.

Speaking engagements are piling up and Chalmers is connecting with television networks to talk about his journey.

"Who knows where this all is going to take me," he says. Though, Chalmers already has another goal – next year he begins training for the 2016 Rio Paralympics.