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Speedway trip expands foster kids' horizons

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A child in a group of 35 foster and adopted children takes in the sights during a "Career Camp" tour of Daytona International Speedway. (N-J | Nigel Cook)



Tala Donhauser, 15, checks out a race car at Daytona International Speedway with one of of 35 foster and adopted children during a tour of Daytona International Speedway on Friday. (N-J | Nigel Cook)

DAYTONA BEACH -- Sitting on Tala Donhauser's lap, the 5-year-old foster child with sunglasses and a ballcap flashes a big smile as the tram goes through one of the Daytona International Speedway tunnels.

He clung to her throughout the tour in the infield, holding on to her hand as they walked through the FanZone.

Tala, 15, knows what it's like to be in foster care. She was in care for three years and lived in two foster homes before being adopted three years ago by one of her foster parents.

They visited the Speedway on Friday as part of a group of 35 local foster and adopted children during the first "Career Camp."

The one-day camp, put on by Community Partnership for Children and the state Department of Children & Families, is designed to inspire foster children to consider new careers for themselves, including work in the sports and event fields, according to DCF officials. The state and local foster care agency also wants to give foster children experiences similar to those of children who live with their families, officials said.

The camp is also part of a statewide DCF summer series called "Camps for Champions" that includes mentoring, team-building skills and other leadership opportunities. The group heard from motivational speakers, had lunch and participated in game-room activities, had a behind-the-scenes tram tour and watched a short film.

The Speedway provided the tour and other services for free and Grassroots Giving, a nonprofit in Daytona Beach, paid for the children's lunch, according to Clay LaRoche, DCF community relations consultant.

"I think it's really nice because we can come and have fun," said Tala, who was enjoying helping out with the younger foster children.

She was also with Mary Donhauser, 15, who was adopted by the Donhausers when she was 3 years old.

Mary's been to the races before but not in the infield. Her favorite driver is Kevin Harvick.

"I like how he drives and how his car changes. They're not always the same color or the same sponsors," she said.

Kelly Donhauser, of New Smyrna Beach, has adopted seven children with her husband, Garry, mainly while in New York.

"I think it's awesome," she said about the Speedway visit. "It would be really nice if the community did more for these children who don't normally get the chance to experience different things that they hear their friends and classmates talk about."

Lenny Santiago, Daytona International Speedway spokesman, said the Speedway participation is "part of our overall program of giving back to the community."

Arnold Anderson, DCF circuit community development administrator, said it was a good opportunity for the children "to see what is in their neighborhood" and learn about the different career opportunities in racing.

"You can race," Anderson said. "But you can also be behind the scenes."

Taylor Cote, 12, was with her brother, Shane, 11. They enjoyed playing pool and air hockey and other games as well as the tour. They were adopted by the same family.

Shane said his favorite driver is Jeff Gordon because a child in one of his previous foster homes had a lot of posters of Gordon.

Courtney Medico, a case manager supervisor with Neighbor To Family and a foster care licensing coordinator, brought four children to the event, two sets of brothers.

Medico said there is not enough funding available to take foster children on various outings so "it's fabulous" when they can spend the day doing fun activities.