

There's been a lot of neat stories that have unfolded throughout my racing career, but I wanted to share a particular story because it deserves to be told. In late fall of 2014, I happened to jump on a go-kart classifieds site that I hadn't been on for many years, as I had sold my outlaw kart equipment in 2011. As I was scanning the ads, I came across a 2004 Phantom go-kart in Independence, Iowa that appeared to be a good deal. After some brief research, I came up with the wild idea of buying the kart and converting it to an outlaw kart. I told my parents what I wanted to do, and they thought I was crazy (I can't imagine why). However, in a matter of weeks I had the kart home and began the process of converting it to an outlaw kart.

Throughout this process I purchased a seat and mounted the pedals but didn't have much of an answer when people asked who the seat was for or why I mounted the pedals where I did. In fact, I hadn't given much thought as to what I was going to do with the kart when I was done. I originally thought I could just sell it to someone new to the sport to get more kids involved, but curiosity got the best of me when I decided I wanted to see how it would run first. I began the hunt for a kid to test the car, which turned into a hunt for a kid to race the car, which turned into a hunt for a kid to drive the car at a handful of shows throughout the season. It was during this hunt (particularly in the go-kart community) where the name of the cousin of a young go-kart racer kept resurfacing – Gage Stevens.

After digging a little, I recognized the name of the kid as one of the students in the elementary school I volunteered at for three years. He seemed to be deserving of the opportunity and passionate about the sport after watching his cousin, but he just didn't have the resources. However, there was a catch: the kid had never really raced before. With that being said, I went ahead and tracked down his mother's phone number and called her out of the blue to ask if I could meet with them about an opportunity for their son. She seemed confused, but she agreed. So, I showed up at a total stranger's house to ask if their eight year old son would drive my racecar, even though he basically had no experience (and as a crew chief, I had little experience as well). I can remember sitting in their driveway that night nervous and worried they would think I was crazy, they would say no, or that it was a bad idea. However, I sat in their dining room and presented an entire presentation about the program (that I decided to name Compass) and how I would like for their son to drive for me. I couldn't quite read their faces throughout the presentation, but when I got to the end, they said they were in. We were all so excited that night, but little did we know that night would change all of our lives forever, because the journey was just beginning. Little did we know what this kid was capable of.

I originally thought Compass would allow me to coach a child and teach them valuable life lessons. Our first season was 2015, and as I look back on the past two years with Gage, I can fully admit that he's been the one to coach me and teach me valuable life lessons instead. As a racecar driver, I wanted to teach him to drive as best I could, but because of his experience, I knew I couldn't expect too much right away. However, he won the first race we ever competed in (an emotional win at that) and went on to win five out of six points races his first season and has picked up three feature wins at a higher level, so far, this season. His on-track accomplishments are great, but the reason I wanted to share his story isn't because he's won some races, because that's the part of Gage that everyone gets to see. It's the part of Gage that forms people's perceptions of him. However, it's the moments I've shared with Gage that not everyone gets to see that I want to share, the part where I've learned more life lessons from him than he has from me. There are so many of these moments, but here are the five that stuck out in my mind.

Moment #1: In the early days of Compass, I often picked Gage up from school and took him to the shop to help me build the car. (Ironically, that seat that I bought and those pedals that I mounted happened to fit perfect and needed little adjustment). It was in one of our conversations while on the way home one day that Gage was telling me about how he liked to play video games, particularly his NASCAR game, and he especially liked playing it at his cousin's house because he had one of those cool steering wheels. I got to thinking about it and went home and dug out my barely used Ferrari steering wheel from my PS2 that I hardly ever used anymore, put it back in the box, and left it on his porch that night after dropping him off. I didn't think much of it, but later that night I received a text from his mom, Shawna, saying as she was going downstairs to ask how the night went getting everything on the car ready, Gage looked up and said something along the lines of, "Mom, I never thought something like this would ever happen to someone like me." Shortly following, he found the steering wheel on the porch and was beyond excited. I've never forgotten that statement from that night, and it's a statement that often keeps me going when Compass gets stressful...he never thought something like this would ever happen to someone like him.

Moment #2: Gage always seems to be in a good mood, always seems to have a smile on his face, and always finds something to giggle about. This often leads to always having a good time and having a lot of fun with racing. However, there was a day that I went to pick him up to take him to the shop, just like always, when he wasn't smiling, and it's a day I'll never forget. Usually when I pick him up to take him to the shop, he always opens the door right away or comes out to the car right away. On this particular day, I sat in the driveway waiting, but he didn't come out. I figured he was probably being pokey, so I went up to knock on the door, when his mom came to the door. I could tell she was kind of flustered, and it didn't take me long to figure out why. I could hear Gage's screaming and crying from his bedroom. Crying over a personal conflict he was dealing with in his young life (a conflict that had prompted me to give him the opportunity). Up until that point, it had sometimes been easy to forget that this whole experience wasn't just about working on cars or racing or winning, it was about something so much bigger. That day has always reminded me of that.

Moment #3: On that same day, Gage eventually came out to the shop. One of the jobs we had to do that day was to wash the air filter covers on his car. I took one and gave him the other one and showed him how to wash them. I walked outside and began waving the air filter cover in a horizontal motion to dry it out, when out of the corner of my eye, I caught Gage moving his in the same motion. I began to wave mine in a vertical motion and again saw him copying me out of the corner of my eye. I grinned and began to dance all around like a maniac with mine, and sure enough, Gage did the same, giggling his sweet, infectious, innocent giggle until his stomach hurt. Not only did this moment warm my heart after seeing him in tears earlier, this moment was one of many where Gage taught me an important lesson: he's always watching me. He reiterated this when I was going through the sub sandwich line at Casey's, and he proceeded to order the exact sandwich (spices and all) that I did, even though I knew he wouldn't normally order that kind of sandwich. His ability to recall facts about NASCAR and sprint car drivers/events always shows me his true passion for the sport, and he's always wanting to learn more, both through asking questions as well as watching and learning. He's always watching older drivers like me, and it's helped make me a better person.

Moment #4: Last season when I made history and became the first female to win a feature at Knoxville, little Gage was there amidst all the fans and people congratulating me. He wanted to give his crew chief a big hug and even got interviewed by some of the media. However, away from the spotlight

that night as he was leaving the stadium, he looked up at his mom and said, "Mom, I knew McKenna was going to win tonight because I prayed." Gage has always reminded me to put God first and to serve him, and his dedication to his faith is nothing short of inspiring.

Moment #5: As I mentioned earlier, Gage has experienced a lot of success on the track. However, I can honestly say as his crew chief, underneath his shield, he has better sportsmanship than any driver I've ever met. There hasn't ever been a time when he's been in a tangle on the track that he hasn't instantly asked if his friends are ok when I pop his helmet shield open. I've lost track of how many times he's asked me if it's ok if he goes to wish someone good luck, tell someone good job, or see if someone's ok. This season, after one of his first wins at the level he moved up to this year, he came off the track and as I popped his helmet shield, rather than finding a driver happy he just won, I found mine bawling because he made contact with another driver on the way to his victory, causing them to go to the back, and he "wasn't happy he won because of that".

That's his reality. That's the type of person he is. Gage might have family, friends, and things like Compass in his career that some might contribute his success too, but Gage is special because he's Gage. Anyone that knows Gage well has experienced moments with him like the ones above that leave them speechless. At the age of ten, his sportsmanship, his heart, his faith, and his talent are greater than words could ever describe and greater than many could even dream of, including myself. I didn't know what I was getting myself into showing up on this family's doorstep less than two years ago, but God had a plan. Gage might be seen in different ways by different people, but I've been thankful to be blessed with the opportunity to get to know the Gage behind the shield, the real Gage. The Gage that inspires me to be the best person I can be every single day, to always be a good sport, to smile even when times get tough, and to never forget to thank the man above. I had always thought the hunt for a driver, finding a go-karter's cousin, and showing up on their doorstep was kind of random, but I've found it wasn't random at all. That was no accident. Gage Stevens was born to be a racecar driver. That's his reality.