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Special Olympics Minnesota development director Kathy Karkula can't gush enough about Farmington resident Marc Williams, a man she calls "amazing," "one in a million," and "the ultimate volunteer."

And perhaps rightfully so. This marks the 20th year Williams has participated in the *Northland 300* snowmobile ride fund-raiser for *Special Olympics Minnesota*. Over those years, Williams has raised more than \$100,000 for *Special Olympics*, and he's on his way to donating still more this year.

Farmington's Marc Williams (left) has done many things during his 20 years with the *Special Olympics Minnesota* fund-raiser, *Northland 300*, including helping athletes to carry the Flame of Hope to the

A lasting relationship

It was 1989 when Karkula — a woman who had been doing charity snowmobile rides for several years — got the idea to organize one for *Special Olympics*. At the time, she said, most of the rides she and her friends had been on were organized by people who were not really snowmobilers. Karkula said she and her friends "sat down one time and did it right" when they created the *Northland 300*, and it has been going ever since.

That same year, Williams's friend, John Marshall, asked Williams to ride along to an organizational meeting for the first *Northland 300*. He did. By the end of the meeting, Williams wanted to go along.

"I had about a week and a half to raise the minimum amount," Williams recalled. In 1989, the minimum was \$300.

A piece of cake, or so it seems. Williams hit up friends, family and the Farmington Eagles Club for donations. When he arrived for the first *Northland 300*, he came with a donation of \$1,542 in hand.

On his first ride, Williams recalls, his group got lost once, then a second time. After the second time, he kind of took over leading the group he was with.

"They adopted me as one of the trail leaders after that," he said.

Little wonder, though, that he would become a trail leader. A member of the Farmington Sno-Tigers snowmobile club for about 35 years, Williams is the local safety instructor for snowmobile training.

Over the years, his bond with *Special Olympics* has strengthened. He has been involved with *Minnesota's* winter and *summer games*, served on the board of directors, held every position associated with the ride and, "probably received every award that is possible," Karkula said. Additionally, he has helped athletes run the Special Olympic Flame of Hope and light the cauldron to kick off different events.

"I love working with Marc. If all volunteers could be like that, gosh, would we be in a good world. Besides that, he really knows how to ride a snowmobile," she said. "He's everybody to the sport of snowmobiling. He's the ultimate volunteer."

A corporate sponsor

For several years, Williams was getting a sizable donation from the Farmington Eagles Club, where he is a member. In recent years, though, Williams has given up that portion of his contribution, and lined the Eagles Club up to become one of the *Northland 300* corporate sponsors. This year, the Eagles Club is cosponsor for first prize in the *Northland 300*'s annual raffle, a 2008 Yamaha Grizzly 450 ATV.

Karkula gives credit to Williams for getting the Eagles involved because, thanks to a request by the Farmington Eagles Club fund-raising committee, Farmington now has its own *Special Olympics* team -- the Farmington Tiger Paws *Special Olympics* Team.

Williams receives donations from other service organizations in Farmington, as well, particularly the Farmington American Legion and the Farmington VFW. All proceeds from this Sunday's monthly Sons of the American Legion omelet breakfast at the Legion will go toward *Special Olympics*.

Motivation

In 20 years, Williams has never missed a *Northland 300* ride. Even while he was living out of state, he came back for the ride. Oddly, he does not own a snowmobile, but borrows from friends when the time comes.

So why does he keep it up? The answer is a simple smile.

"Sometimes (the Special Olympic athletes) do real well, and sometimes they're just so happy to finish. When they win a medal ... just to see the smile on their faces and the happiness inside them, it's heartwarming," Williams said.

It helps that he has developed many friendships over the years through *Northland 300*.

"You really meet a lot of great people. Everybody gets along, and we're snowmobiling for a good cause," he said.

Over a four-day ride, *Northland 300* participants will log about 300 miles. This year, the group will meet in Two Harbors on Jan. 23. On Jan. 24, an 8 a.m. opening ceremony is planned, with the Lighting of the Olympic Flame. Riders will then depart for Ely, a 150-mile run in one day. Friday, Jan. 25 is a free day, open for drivers to ride as they please. On Saturday, Jan. 26, the group returns to Two Harbors for a banquet and awards ceremony.

Last year, Williams was one of 96 snowmobilers to participate. The group raised \$171,211 for *Special Olympics*. To date, *Northland 300* has raised nearly \$2.6 million. Anyone interested in donating to Special Olympics may call Williams at 651-341-6616.

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