



PRESS RELEASE

DARIUS GOES WEST: THE ROLL OF HIS LIFE

Where would you go if you'd never been away from home? What would you do if you didn't have much time left? **DARIUS WENT WEST!**

Meet 15-year-old **Darius Weems** from Athens, Georgia, who was born with **Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy** (DMD), the most common fatal genetic disorder to affect children worldwide. In 1989, Darius watched his beloved older brother, Mario, pass away from the same disease at age 19. Soon after, Darius lost use of the muscles in his legs and began using a wheelchair.

A group of Darius's college-age friends, led by special education major **Logan Smalley**, felt there was no need for his quality of life to disintegrate along with his muscles. So, they decided to take Darius, who had never seen a range of mountains, never dipped his toes into an ocean, and never crossed a state line on the adventure of a lifetime. After raising **\$60,000**, this "band of brothers" rented a wheelchair-accessible RV and hit the road in July of 2005. Their three-week, cross-country journey had one major goal: to reach Los Angeles and convince **MTV's** popular show, "Pimp My Ride," to customize Darius's wheelchair. Along the way, they evaluated wheelchair accessibility at many of America's major tourist attractions and raised awareness of DMD by holding over a dozen press conferences. They also found joy, brotherhood, and the knowledge that life, even when imperfect, is always worth the ride.

All profits from this documentary will be donated to **Charley's Fund** (www.charleysfund.org) for DMD research in hopes of finding treatment or a cure for this disease.

Trip Highlights:

- Darius's first glimpse of the ocean in **Panama City, FL**, was unforgettable. A crowd of onlookers watched in awe as Darius frolicked in the waves. This was no easy feat for the 11-member crew, who painstakingly moved planks of board across the sand to wheel Darius's oversized chair into the surf.
- **New Orleans** rolled out the red carpet for Darius, providing complimentary lodging, meals (including breakfast at Brennan's), and a swamp boat tour. Footage of a bead-laden Darius getting mobbed while rolling down **Bourbon Street** is priceless.
- In **Las Vegas**, Darius won \$50 from a giant slot machine when documentary director, Logan Smalley, gambled on his behalf.
- In **Temecula, CA**, Darius soared high above California's wine country in a wheelchair-accessible hot air balloon.
- In **Los Angeles**, Darius was treated to a suite and his first-ever massage at the Beverly Hilton, VIP tickets to **Jay Leno**, and a private tour of Wisteria Lane by "Desperate Housewife" **Felicity Huffman** and her husband, actor **William H. Macy**. Both Huffman and Macy appear in the documentary.
- In **Windsor, Colorado**, Darius had a wild west experience when the crew was invited to have lunch at a ranch owned by a professional roper.
- In **St. Louis**, Darius was made honorary fire chief and stayed in the Presidential suite at the Drury Plaza hotel.

DARIUS GOES WEST

THE ROLL OF HIS LIFE

A documentary by Logan Smalley

Short Summary

A crew of college-age students takes Darius Weems, 15, who has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, cross-country in an RV in hopes of convincing MTV's "Pimp My Ride" to customize Darius's wheelchair.

Synopsis

Where would you go if you'd never been away from home? What would you do if you didn't have much time left? DARIUS WENT WEST!

Meet 15-year-old Darius Weems from Athens, Georgia, who was born with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD), the most common fatal genetic disorder to affect children worldwide. In 1999, he watched his beloved older brother, Mario, pass away from the same disease at age 19. Soon after, Darius lost use of the muscles in his legs and had to begin using a wheelchair.

A group of Darius's college-age friends decided there was no need for his quality of life to disintegrate along with his muscles. In the summer of 2005, they rented a wheelchair-accessible RV and took Darius, who had never seen mountains, the ocean or even crossed a state line, on the adventure of a lifetime. The ultimate goal of their 7,000-mile cross-country journey was to reach Los Angeles and convince MTV's hit show "Pimp My Ride" to customize Darius's wheelchair. Along the way, they evaluated wheelchair accessibility in America, celebrated the 15th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and raised awareness of DMD—particularly among a generation not familiar with Jerry Lewis. They also found joy, brotherhood and the knowledge that life, even when imperfect, is always worth the ride.

What's Important About Darius Goes West

This documentary is designed to entertain as well as educate the masses about DMD by telling a story through the lens of friendship. In addition to hilarious footage from this all-male road trip, *Darius Goes West* features personal stories from two other families affected by DMD, as well as an in-depth interview with a medical expert discussing promising new research that offers hope for treatment and possibly even a cure.

This film focuses on ability, not disability. Darius Weems is no DMD poster child. He's a typical teenager who wakes up grouchy and curses on occasion. But audiences will love his sense of humor and his megawatt smile. And instead of feeling sorry for Darius because he is terminally ill, viewers will share his excitement as he discovers America.

We know—and Darius knows—that DMD won't be cured in his lifetime. Nevertheless, Darius took a road trip to raise awareness of his disease in hopes of benefitting those with DMD who follow in his footsteps—and to prove that life has no limits, even for those in a wheelchair.

Funding

The budget for the Darius Goes West trip and film (including all camera and sound equipment) was raised primarily by selling movie credits (\$10 and up) to individuals via our website, placing piggy banks throughout Athens, Georgia, selling barbecue and hawking hot dogs. We also received grants from United Cerebral Palsy, Children's Wish Foundation International, Emmanuel Episcopal Church and the Turner Foundation.

➤ Facts About DMD ◀

Duchenne is the most common and most severe form of muscular dystrophy. It has a 100% fatality rate, with most children dying in their late teens or early twenties. Approximately one in 3,500 boys is born with DMD. One hundred percent eventually lose mobility and must use a wheelchair—most between 10 and 12 years old. DMD is associated with respiratory failure, heart failure and debilitating orthopedic complications. One-third of all DMD cases are the result of random in utero mutation, with no warning before the affected baby is born.

➤ Our Beneficiary ◀

By raising awareness of DMD, *Darius Goes West* also hopes to raise money, and any profits from our film will be funneled directly into DMD research. Historically, most of the funds raised for DMD have subsidized the tremendous cost of caring for children with this brutal disease, not research to cure it. Our profits will be donated to Charley's Fund (www.charleysfund.org), a nonprofit that directs money into the hands of researchers who have the best shot at developing a treatment or cure for DMD. Medical experts agree that for the first time in the history of DMD, the time is ripe for a major breakthrough. Over the past two years, scientists have made significant advances in molecular medicine and gene therapy. Major biotech and pharmaceutical companies are now investing in research that will bring DMD therapies to the market.

➤ Director's Bio ◀

Logan Smalley was born in Ithaca, New York, and grew up in Athens, Georgia. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Georgia in 2006 with a degree in Special Education. He is currently pursuing a Master's degree in "Technology, Innovation, & Education at Harvard University. *Darius Goes West: The Roll of His Life* is his first feature film.

At 13, Logan was volunteering at Project REACH, a summer camp for children with special needs, when he first met Darius. At the time, Darius was still fully mobile—"shooting baskets with a pretty good lay-up for a five-year-old." Since then, the two have kept in close touch, going to movies, playing video games and watching TV together. In fact, it was while watching MTV's automotive makeover show, "Pimp My Ride," that Logan came up with an idea: If they could spruce up old vans and beat-up cars, why not Darius's wheelchair?

During Logan's 8-year affiliation with Project REACH and while serving as a long-term substitute teacher at Clarke Central High School, he created and directed several video vignettes involving children with special needs.

In 2004, Logan completed a 12-week study abroad program through the University of Georgia at the Cannes Film Festival.

Logan plays piano, harmonica and the musical saw. He composed the music for *Darius Goes West: The Roll of His Life*.

➤ The Darius Goes West Cast and Crew ◀

Most of the crew members who accompanied Darius on his cross-country journey met Darius while working at Project REACH. Meet this "band of brothers" and listen to their thoughts about the trip:

ANDREW CARSON: (Crew member) a student at Davidson College

"No matter how many cool things we saw (The Grand Canyon, Vegas, The St. Louis Arch), I thought that the best time we had was a water fight while swimming in Los Altos. When Darius gets in a pool, he can maneuver himself around fairly easily—what a dream come true. He started squirting the crew with small water pistols, and we started squirting him back. He'd move his head side to side to try to dodge the squirts and yell, 'Matrix!' I laughed for about two minutes straight while I pictured Big D in Keanu Reeves' role from the movie series The Matrix. That is the Darius I know as the inspiration that hopefully will make a difference for people like him to come in the future."

DANIEL EPTING: (Driver) a business owner living in Athens, Georgia

"I hope that what we accomplished will have the residual effect of motivating others to get out and do it: swim in the ocean, roll down Bourbon Street, go 750 feet down into a cave, look thousands of feet deep into a canyon, pull a slot machine, check out Hollywood, feel the Golden Gate's fog, whitewater raft the Colorado River, drive and drive and drive and drive and drive—oh, I'm sorry, did I mention Kansas?"

JOHN HADDEN: (Cinematography) a University of Georgia film studies graduate

"I'm sure everyone who made donations didn't know Darius at the time, but they'll get to know him in the documentary. You'll hear that infectious laugh and see his big smile, and you'll understand why so many people worked so hard to make this trip happen. You'll see the look of brief terror surpassed by overwhelming joy on Darius's face as he gets tossed around by the waves at Panama City Beach, and you'll understand why Jason and I were still wide awake at 3 o'clock in the morning that same day, even though by then, we had crossed two more states and worked our way through a crazy crowd of people on Bourbon Street."

JOHN HARMON: (Crew member) a student at Georgia College

"It was great to see everyone's reaction towards Darius and the whole crew as we went across the country. We always received such a warm welcome wherever we went. This put in perspective for me how doing something good for someone else can bring out the best in people."

JASON HEES: (Sound) a musician living in Nashville, Tennessee

"There are certain events in everyone's life that shape the future for them. Some of them are tragic, some of them are exciting, some of them are a realization, and some of them just have to do with meeting someone. For me, every one of those was true. Darius Goes West, the event, was one of those monumental 'things' that will always be with me, but meeting Darius has truly impacted the way I will go about my life in the future in whatever I do. There is something that happens to a person when you drop all of your worldly conceptions and devote time—serious time—to someone who needs it. Something changes inside you—something that makes you want to do more, change more, make a difference, and just become a better person."

SAM JOHNSON: (Crew member) a student at the University of Georgia

"I remember the night Logan first told me about the whole Darius Goes West idea. It caught my ear like nothing ever has and I doubt anything ever will. I love Darius, and it just clicked as the perfect thing to do with him. Looking back on that night, I think we both knew this was going to be the most indescribably life-changing experience for the twelve of us. And it definitely was."

COLLIN SHEPLEY: (Crew member) a student at the University of Georgia

"I believe Darius is going to be the new face for muscular dystrophy. He is going to change the conceptions—and misconceptions—most folks have about people with disabilities."

BEN SMALLEY: (Crew member) a student at the University of Georgia

"We had so many up and downs, yet we still worked together as a group. This kind of thing cannot happen with just any group of people. It was Darius at the center that kept the fire going. I remember many times when I was just dead tired and wasn't sure if I could keep up that pace. Then I'd look at Darius's smiling face with those big cheeks and remind myself why I was doing this."

KEVIN WIER: (Still photography) a student at Gainesville State College

"People say that Darius is lucky to have friends like us, but I feel lucky to have Darius as my friend."

DYLAN WILSON: (Cinematography) a newspaper photographer living in Brooklyn, New York

"This wasn't a trip about us. There were eleven second fiddles to our star. Our mission was to make this the trip of a lifetime for Darius. I think we succeeded, and somewhere along the way, it became the trip of a lifetime for all of us."

➤ **Darius Update** ◀

Darius is now a senior at Clarke Central High School in Athens, Georgia. His interests continue to be video games, sports and girls. He is so grateful for all the support that made his trip out west possible and has been having a blast attending film festivals in 2007.

➤ **Fan (e) mail** ◀

Thousands followed our cross-country journey and read our (almost) daily blogs. Here's a small sampling of some of the most touching messages we received while on the road:

"My heart is filled with joy knowing there are good people, especially young ones, in this world. I spent three weeks spellbound by the beauty of your souls. Roll-on, Darius!"

-Karen Barton

"I'm the guy you met at the beach in California. I will never forget seeing all of you hauling Darius up and down the hill at that beach."

-Tom Cleary

"If my son, who has DMD, has friends like you guys some day, that would be all I'd ever wish for him."

-Maria McDonnell

"We were sitting right behind you as you watched Shamu at Sea World in San Diego. I'm glad you had a great time there. It was a beautiful day. Loved your shirt (pimp my wheelchair) and so glad to have been an indirect part of your day. Keep on having fun"

-Marie Frawley

"What a group of hotties!"

-Eve Carson

"Watching the trip unfold simply takes my breath away."

-Mary Garrison

"I'm in awe of you guys. You obviously love each other and Darius. The world is in great hands."

-Pat Murphy

➤ **Sales Contact Information** ◀

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DARIUS GOES WEST: THE ROLL OF HIS LIFE

FILM FESTIVAL (AND OTHER) AWARDS (TO DATE)

**SANTA BARBARA INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Audience Choice for Best Feature

**OXFORD FILM FESTIVAL
(Oxford, MS)**

Best Documentary (Juried)

AND

Audience Favorite Award

**PICTURE THIS FILM FESTIVAL
(Disability fest in Calgary, Canada)**

Honourable Mention

Best Documentary Over 30 Minutes (Juried)

OMAHA FILM FESTIVAL

Audience Choice, Best Documentary

AND

Best Documentary (Juried)

**CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

The Plain Dealer Roxanne T. Mueller

Audience Choice Award

AND

**The Greg Gund Memorial
Standing Up Film Competition
(Audience Choice)**

AFI/DALLAS

Audience Choice Award, Best Documentary

**LONGBAUGH FILM FESTIVAL
(Portland, OR)**

Best Documentary (Juried)

**SUNSCREEN FILM FESTIVAL
(St. Petersburg, FL)**

Best Feature (Juried)

AND

Audience Choice, Best Feature

**SUPERFEST INTERNATIONAL
DISABILITY FESTIVAL**

(Berkeley, CA)

Merit Award (Juried)

ATLANTA FILM FESTIVAL

Audience Choice Award

**PALM BEACH INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Audience Choice Award

INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL OF BOSTON

Audience Choice Award

**BERKSHIRE INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Audience Choice Award

**JACKSON HOLE INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**

Audience Choice Award

AND

Best Documentary (Juried)

**SIDEWALK FILM FESTIVAL
(Birmingham, AL)**

Audience Choice Award

AND

Best Documentary (Juried)

REAL TO REEL FILM FESTIVAL

Best Amateur Documentary

OJAI FILM FESTIVAL

Audience Choice Award

THE CHRISTOPHERS

Grand Prize

Student Film Competition 2007

DARIUS GOES WEST: THE ROLL OF HIS LIFE

CAST AND CREW

Director Logan Smalley
Co-Director Allison Firor
Assistant Director Jarrard Cole
Cinematography John Hadden, Dylan Wilson
Sound Jason Hees, Collin Shepley
Music Logan Smalley
Raps Darius Weems
Cast (appear in film) Andrew Carson, Daniel Epting, John Harmon

Jason Hees, Sam Johnson, Collin Shepley

Ben Smalley, Logan Smalley, Kevin Wier, Darius Weems

PRODUCERS

Julia Eisenman
Greg Schenz

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Loreen Arbus Productions, Inc.
Margo Barbakow
Children's Wish Foundation International
Mike Duemmel
Theo Gund
Eric Perlmutter
Jeff Scheftel
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