

Vietnam veteran Gary Wetzel and his wife, Kathy's, act of kindness would sprout a seemingly unlikely but deep friendship with a "boisterous" and "sassy" 4-year-old and her family.

But Gary, a Medal of Honor recipient, has been working to help others for nearly 50 years. He often speaks with school groups about military history and patriotism. In 1984, he even founded the first chapter of Wisconsin Vietnam Vets, because, as he saw it, "At the time, no one really understood some of the traumas that the Vietnam vet is really going through."

Gary joined the Army in 1966, serving in aviation. Maybe he picked the Army because both his parents served in that branch during World War II, he said.

"I was looking forward to serving my country by serving in another country," he said. After more than a day riding on a cargo plane, he arrived in Vietnam mid-morning.

"There's a big rush of that jungle humid air that came in, and you more or less could smell Vietnam," he said.

There, on Jan. 8, 1968, he "distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty," according to the citation. Though he lost his arm and sustained other wounds because of two enemy rockets, and in spite of going in and out of consciousness due to blood loss, Gary "staggered back to his original position in his gun-well and took the enemy forces under fire. His machinegun was the only weapon placing effective fire on the enemy at that time." With that weapon, he "eliminated the automatic weapons emplacement that had been inflicting heavy casualties on the American troops and preventing them from moving against this strong enemy force" and then continued to assist his commanding officer and crew chief.

Gary calls Jan. 8 his survival day.

For his service in Vietnam, he received the Medal of Honor from President Lyndon Johnson in 1968, which was a surprise to him at the time.

"I don't think anybody ever thinks they're going to receive the nation's highest award. Here I am a civilian and I get notified to go to Washington," Gary said. Since then, he's met nine U.S. presidents and attended inaugurations because of a medal he said honors all veterans.

"Even though I've had the privilege to put that blue ribbon around my neck... I not only wear it for me, I wear it for everybody else and consider myself more or less a caretaker."

But his biggest fan isn't a politician. It's 4-year-old Bella Zizzo, a Wisconsin girl born with

limb difference.

Bella's mother, Sarah, wrote in her blog that this means she has a left forearm and wrist but no fingers.

"She's a strong and determined and mighty little girl," Sarah said. "She's like a big person in a little package."

The Zizzo family was trying to raise money to send her to Camp No Limits, a camp in Florida for kids with limb loss and their families. Sarah said it was important to the family that Bella attend the camp before kindergarten "to make friends who she could see were different than her."

It was just coincidence Gary's wife, Kathy, ran across the Zizzo family's story online. Gary said in the story, a little girl was planting seeds to grow fingers.

"I figured let's jump in and help this little lady," he said. They reached out.

Enter the Zizzo family.

Upon meeting, Gary and Bella took to each other quickly.

As Gary is an avid motorcyclist, his prosthetic arm allows him to ride a Harley. Because Bella has grandpas with Harleys, Sarah said, Bella may have felt more comfortable. Plus, she recognized he had a difference like hers.

"She's a little blue-eyed blonde with long hair. She's just a cutie pie," Gary said. "She gives you these things called hugs - they're kind of neat."

Gary said Bella wants a hook like his, but not as big. In fact, when the Zizzos took Bella to a specialist in Chicago, Bella didn't like any of the prosthetic options because they weren't black like Gary's.

Though Sarah had organized fundraisers, including a few motorcycle runs and bowling events, plus shared the family's story through her blog, the goal was still not yet met to get Bella to Camp No Limits. Plus, the goal in fundraising wasn't just the money. It was about raising awareness for people with limb difference, Sarah said.

"Grandpa Gary" and "Grandma Kathy" would see to it the family got there.

They organized a poker run at Post 434 in Oak Creek, Wisc., with an after-party at the House of Harley-Davidson. Gary said in spite of inclement weather the day of the event,

more than 100 bikes showed up for "Gary Wetzel's Ride for Bella."

Sarah said Bella refers to the men as "her" bikers.

The event raised enough to send the family to Camp No Limits. The Zizzo family attended in January.

While Bella may be a ways off from driving a Harley like Grandpa Gary's, at camp the family learned bike modifications they could make on her bike so she can ride it. Bella also worked on perfecting zipping zippers and snapping buttons. They even stretched some skills that can plague kids who are a year or two older, such as tying shoelaces.

And there was still another treat in store.

"Gary's Ride for Bella" had rallied a little extra money Gary suggested the Zizzos might use for taking Bella about an hour's drive from camp, to "a place called Disney World."

The Zizzos saved this as a post-camp surprise for the kids. Sarah said Bella's favorite part at Disney World was meeting the characters. She met Ariel from "The Little Mermaid," and told Cinderella's sister she loves her.

"It was an amazing experience all together," Sarah said.

But now that Bella's home, she has one more person she wants to talk to: Gary.

"She's anxious to see him and tell him about her experience, what she saw at camp," Sarah said. "I've cried about it several times just because it's so touching that someone who is a complete stranger to our family - essentially we were strangers - they were just reaching out to see if there was anything they could do. It means a lot to me."