

It was weather for running the heater and cracking the window. Good driving weather, when the sun shines through a filter of crisp air and the leaves fall in clumps from the trees.

Bill Hussion's senses were alive, despite his long night of work. Bill dropped off the big rig he drives from Indianapolis to South Bend each night, trading it for his pickup truck with the rumbling muffler that announces his arrival well in advance.

Bill enjoyed the drive home through Haughville and its tough streets on the near Westside of Indianapolis where he grew up. The motorcycle club to which he still belongs, The Vigilantes, is there, a haunt for bikers with nicknames like "Snake" and "Porkchop."

Bill Hussion knows the neighborhood like he knows his nightly route to South Bend. The people have changed, but the place looks much the same.

The first time Bill Hussion saw Brittany Bell she was on the corner across from the motorcycle club. Her braided pigtails, adorned with brightly-colored balls, bobbed in the wind. Bill's eyes went right to her.

She looked bookish in her glasses as she sat in her wheelchair waiting for the school bus. Not a hint of self-pity about her. She sat brave and proud, all of 8 or 9 years old, waiting for her bus with her head held high.

"She's ironclad," Bill thought to himself. "Cute as a button."

He waved at the little girl from his pickup truck. She waved back from her corner.

He smiled.

She peeked at him over the top of her glasses and smiled back, a grin that started on her lips and quickly took over her entire face; a smile that melted him.

It went like that for weeks—two strangers, different generations and colors of skin—trading waves and smiles until the frigid morning Bill saw her mother struggling to get her daughter's wheelchair down the steps of their home.

"I got to wondering how tough the winter was going to be for them," Bill says.

"What would happen when there was snow on the ground and the mother had to struggle to get her girl down those steps and into her wheelchair to the bus stop?"

One morning after the bus pulled away, Bill parked his truck and approached her mother, Lanette Bell.

The little girl's name was as lovely as her smile. Born with cerebral palsy, Brittany had been in a wheelchair all of her life. She was, her mother said, a "sweet child," strong on the inside, and she never asked for help. She was a chip off the old block.

Lanette was a single mother of three who had her hands full with Brittany, two teenage boys, and frequent trips to Riley Hospital for Children for Brittany's follow-up care.

Lanette had no car, and not much money, but plenty of dignity.

Bill asked her if she'd looked into building a wheelchair ramp from their

home to help Brittany to and from the bus stop every morning. Lanette had inquired but was told she needed to come up with the first \$500.

“I told her right then and there I’d help her get the ramp built,” Bill says. “I know people, who know people, who know people, so I started making calls.”

People came out of the woodwork to help.

The Vigilantes Club offered to pull \$2,500 out of the general fund to build the ramp, but it wasn’t necessary.

Bill’s friend Ben Keelen, a builder, donated the lumber. Another friend, Jim Mayhew, volunteered the excavating and finishing work.

As word spread in the construction community, even more workers stepped up with materials.

The ramp project took on a life of its own. “This whole project made me feel lucky,” Ben Keelen says. “I’m glad Bill called me. As field supervisor, it’s my job to put people in the right place at the right time. This was the right place at the right time.”

On a sunny morning in early June, a varied group of construction workers, truckers, and bikers met at Lanette Bell’s Haughville home and started sawing, pounding and pouring.

Brittany, her mother, brothers and extended family looked on. Brittany had a smile as bright as the summer sun.

“I’ve never seen an ounce of self-pity from that child,” Bill Hussion says. “She is absolutely oblivious to her disability. I’ve never heard he ask for anything except an occasional glass of lemonade or a Popsicle.”

Within two days, the volunteers had completed the ramp. With the donated materials and labor, it didn’t cost the family a penny. “Brittany couldn’t get the smile off her face,” Bill remembers. “We lifted her out of the wheelchair and she put her handprints in the freshly poured concrete at the base of the ramp.”

When it dried, Brittany wheeled herself through the door and out of her house for the first time as the volunteers looked on.

Cheers rose and tears fell.

As Lanette rolled Brittany back up the ramp, the jubilant mom danced as she pushed, a spring in her step,

“I’m convinced that God sent these people,” Lanette says.

“Bill is our hero.”

Bill Hussion is adamant that he’s no hero.

“I’m just a trucker and biker with a few connections,” he says.

Including the one that counts the most--the connection he made in an instant with a wave and a smile--to the little girl on the corner in pigtailed and braids.