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More than 60 truckers, sponsors, and supporters of this year's Log A Load harvest.

Log A Load for Kids: Bringing People Together

It was Easter Sunday. Five-year-old Ashkan Thibodeaux and his 4-year-old brother Wyatt were playing outside their family's home in Coleraine and wandered off. They hadn't been gone long when parents Trisha and Nick realized the boys were no longer close by.

"They went on an epic adventure across the road," Trisha says. "Luckily, it had snowed, so I followed their footprints. They wound through a field, down by a river. I was yelling and yelling and yelling."

What they didn't know is that

Wyatt had slipped into a frozen creek, and older brother Ashkan had gone in to rescue him, guiding Wyatt to safety. The trouble was, Ash was now in the creek and in grave danger.

"I found Wyatt," Trisha says, "and Nick found Ash and pulled him out of the creek and started CPR. The first responders were there within a couple minutes."

Fortunately, Wyatt was hardly worse for the wear. Ashkan on the other hand had been in the creek's icy waters a bit too long.

It started a series of events that included six hours of manual CPR, a life-saving plane ride to Minneapolis in search of world-class healthcare, and countless prayers.

"It was terrifying," Trisha says. "It was honestly the worst day of my life. It's hard to describe the emotions, and the feeling that your kid isn't going to make it. There's nothing like it."

Log A Load for Kids is a national organization started by loggers, designed to raise money to support treatment, education, and research at Children's Miracle Network and other children's hospitals. The group started in 1988 in South Carolina and soon spread across the country, including to Minnesota. Loggers in our state have been holding harvests and raising money since nearly the beginning.

On a warm Monday in July, Scheff Logging's cut-to-length crew and Lovdahl and Sons' conventional crew were operating on a tract of private land in Balsam Township belonging to UPM Blandin. They expected to need only a couple of days to harvest 300 cords of mostly aspen and pine—with a little spruce, birch, and maple mixed in. By Thursday, more than two dozen companies will send truckers to load the timber and haul it to five different destinations. In all, nearly fifty companies connected to Minnesota's forest products industry will contribute either labor, materials, and/or cash, all to benefit sick and injured children through

Log A Load for Kids.

"We've been working on this for several months," says Alex Kennedy, chair of Minnesota's Log A Load committee. "From the gravel to put in this road, to the fuel we're using in the machines, everything is donated. It's really cool when all these companies come together—come together as competitors and do this to raise money for these kids."

Log A Load committee members have seen first-hand how children in our state are helped by the funds that are raised through events like this. In June, the committee traveled to Gillette Children's Hospital in the Twin Cities for a tour of their facilities and to meet some of the kids and their families that Log A Load helps. The visit was an eye-opener, driving home the importance of harvests like this one.

"To see families that are affected and spend time there, it means a lot to us," Kennedy says. "It means a lot that we have a purpose, and what we're doing for these kids, when they're sick or having trouble in life, that the money goes to them. We got to see where it goes. I have some close friends whose kids have spent some time at Gillette's and will still continue to spend time at Gillette's. To be able to be a part of something this big where all these companies come together, all these people come together, it means a lot to me."

It all hits close to home for Birchdale logger Brady Hasbargen. He and his wife Kyra joined the



Aspen is harvested with a John Deere 853M feller buncher.

Log A Load board two years ago. A short time later—after he'd begun planning his own harvest fundraiser—their nephew Jackson was injured in a dirt bike accident and was air-lifted to the Twin Cities, hoping to receive the kinds of services Log A Load supports. Tragically, Jackson didn't survive his injuries, but the experience hardened Hasbargen's resolve to help kids in similar situations.

"I'll never forget that 2024 day, losing my nephew, but also doing that harvest after that," Hasbargen says. "I asked all these guys, what would you think about getting all

these trucks together and we'll go up to the mill together? Everyone was absolutely on board. I still get goosebumps from it. It was just everybody coming together, and we convoyed it. We had a banner honoring Jack on the front truck. We convoyed for Jack. It was very emotional for me."

"That's what got this thing to going, Brady's harvest" says Effie logger Chad Lovdahl, another Log A Load board member. "No matter who you call and ask, they want to help. They'll do whatever. Here's an example: We had some gravel donated for the road. We're having all these people for a barbecue before we haul the wood, so Josh Michalek just showed up in a dump truck with granite to lay on top in case it gets muddy for the barbecue. It's just stuff like that. Everybody's willing to help at the drop of a hat."

Organizers of this year's harvest are quick to point out that they didn't start Log A Load fundraising efforts in Minnesota. Folks like Sappi forester Chris Martland and Georgia Pacific forester Brian Lochner—among others—have served on Minnesota's Log A Load board for years, helping countless children in our state through timber harvests. Former board member Tom McCabe was a huge influence on Hasbargen as he organized his first harvest in 2024.



Harvested timber is processed with a Tigercat slasher.



months since that fateful Easter Sunday, and Ash had a couple of reminders that he hasn't been living the normal, carefree life of a five-year-old. He wore small braces on both feet and also carried a backpack that pumps added nutrition he constantly receives through an IV.

"We call his braces his super boots," Trisha says. "He can walk without them, but his feet are kind of floppy at the moment. They're getting better all the time. Gillette has really helped with strengthening his feet and his hands. He couldn't use his hands before he got to Gillette, but he has grip strength now in both of them."

Watching the boys run, play, and check out the harvest's big equipment, it was difficult to fathom that either one had ever been anything but completely healthy.

"Ash still has a way to go," Nick says. "It's a long road, but he's on it."

"We're praying for one hundred percent," Trisha says. "With the way he's going, there's no reason why he won't make a full recovery."

"It's a miracle," Trisha says. "He's a miracle. They're miracles. And it wasn't just one miracle. It was 50,000 miracles. Everybody that laid hands on him in this journey was put in his path. They were there for a reason, and they were the best of the best at what they do. There are lots of different groups that we owe his life to."

Scheff Logging's crew forwards harvested pine with a Ponsse Buffalo.

"Tom had done it for years," Hasbargen says. "When I was getting involved, he was a big mentor in helping me get the harvest off the ground. We talked all the time. I couldn't have done it without him."

"I love to see what Brady and the rest of those guys are doing because everyone there is so happy to help out," McCabe says. "It's great to see everyone coming together. It's an important cause."

Ashkan arrived at Children's Hospital within hours last April, and he was clinging to life. He'd already experienced one miracle, when Nick arrived at just the right time to pull him from the creek. Once in the Twin Cities, the miracles continued. His stint on life support was short, thanks to his strong young body and some incredibly talented medical professionals who train for moments like these. For 44 days at Children's, Ashkan showed steady improvement. Then he was transferred across town to Gillette Children's for another 44-day stint. At the time, Nick, Trisha, and their family had no idea that the care Ash was receiving was enhanced by funding from loggers operating so close to their home in Coleraine.

"The care they give at Children's and Gillette is amazing," Trisha adds. "Ash got prizes for going through treatments that were scary for him. He got to go to camp. He got to wear regular clothes when we got there, even though I didn't have any with me. They have all the things to make the kids feel normal."

"Gillette's has some extra programs that they're able to offer," Nick says. "For example, they have play rooms for the kids with special equipment because of fundraisers like Log a Load."

Eighty-eight days after saving his brother Wyatt's life from the creek, Ashkan was able to return home, greeted by a police escort, a parade and a party in the Coleraine community that embraced him and his family.

During the harvest, Ashkan, Wyatt, Trisha, and Nick paid a visit to the Balsam Township site, roughly twenty miles from Coleraine. It had been not quite four



Pine pulp is harvested and cut to length with a Ponsse Scorpion King harvester.

Minnesota Log A Load committee members Kennedy, Lovdahl, and Hasbargen got a chance to visit with Ashkan and his family as they visited the harvest. Kennedy lifted Ash and Wyatt into the feller buncher so they could get a nice up-close look at the big machine.

For Hasbargen, it was an emotional day. Two years ago, a miracle wasn't in the cards for his nephew Jackson. Seeing Ash doing so well, thanks in part to funds raised from timber harvests he'd helped organize, was heartening.

"That was very emotional for me," Hasbargen says. "I had to hold it together. The fact that Ash saved his little brother's life, and Children's saved his life, and he went to Gillette's to get back on his feet again is amazing. I can't help but think of Jackson and wonder, what if? But Jackson helps in a totally different way because his story brought all of us loggers together. And it's continuing that way."

Thursday of harvest week is the big day, a day to celebrate. Up until now, all of their efforts have been behind the scenes—the months of planning, followed by the harvesting operations being conducted deep in the woods of Balsam Township. Finally, all the timber has been cut, and trucks are already rolling in by 7AM to be loaded. Soon, Ryan Schall of Titan Machinery and Compeer Financial's John Marchand and Julie Hudecheck will fire up grills to cook burgers and brats to feed the more than sixty loggers, truckers, sponsors, company foresters, and other supporters who will swing by to celebrate the harvest's success and to watch the loaded trucks depart. Once the trucks hit the road, the efforts finally become visible.

The harvest's pine bolts will be hauled to Rayonier in Bemidji. Aspen bolts will be sent to Savanna Pallets, 100-inch pulp wood is headed to Sappi, while tree-length aspen, as well as pine pulp will be delivered to PCA's International Falls mill. Finally, spruce from the site is headed for UPM Blandin in Grand Rapids. Along the way to each mill, truckers will travel together, and folks around northern Minnesota will get their first look at the fruits of their collective labor.

"We get asked a lot, when's



Wyatt and Ashkan Thibodeaux with parents Nick and Trisha.

the convoy coming to town?" Hasbargen says.

"When we leave here, there will be trucks going to Bemidji, Cloquet, to McGregor, to International Falls. I mean, all over," Lovdahl says. "And there will be, I guarantee, people along those routes in the towns, honking and just waiting to watch us go."

Among the truckers is McGregor's Jerry Demenge, loading aspen with his center-mount, to be hauled to Sappi's Cloquet mill. Demenge and his wife Aileen were two of the first members of Minnesota's Log A Load board. In fact, at Minnesota's first Log A Load harvest some thirty years ago, Demenge's truck was the first to be loaded and the first to depart the site—the first Minnesota



Wyatt and Ashkan Thibodeaux check out the Lovdahl and Sons feller buncher.

load to help kids in need through our state's Log A Load program.

"Aileen and I were on the Log A Load board for seven, maybe ten years," Demenge says. "We did have a relative of ours, a little girl, who went to Gillette's a couple of times, so when the opportunity came up, we wanted to be a part of it. It hit home for me. It's kind of neat thirty years later to see what it's grown into."

After everyone is fed, before the trucks are ready to roll, everyone is called together for a group photo. Kennedy addresses the crowd, thanking all for their hard work. When he's done speaking, and as drivers start heading for their trucks, Kennedy and Hasbargen are approached by Kevin Jalonen, Parts



Titan Machinery's Ryan Schall and John Marchand of Compeer Financial grill burgers and brats while trucks are loaded at the Log A Load harvest site.



Jerry Demenge loads harvested aspen onto his truck. Demenge hauled the first load from Minnesota's first Log A Load harvest roughly thirty years ago.

Manager at Road Machinery and Supplies in Virginia, a sponsor of this year's harvest.

A 22-year RMS employee, Jalonen didn't know when he went to work that morning that he'd find his way to the Log A Load harvest. He wasn't even aware it was happening. But when he went to visit the office of RMS sales manager Brad Carlson, he was just heading out the door for Balsam Township to grab a burger and celebrate with the other sponsors and supporters. Carlson invited Jalonen to jump in the truck and join him. Along the way, Carlson explained where they were headed. Once Jalonen arrived at the site and saw all the hard work and long hours loggers and truckers had been putting in to help sick and injured children, he got emotional. Jalonen's grandson was born with heart valve problems and has been treated at Children's, having his first surgery there at six months old. He's proud RMS is supporting Log A Load for Kids.

"I just want to thank you guys," Jalonen told Hasbargen and Kennedy, choking back tears. "I've seen what they do at Children's. They're great. My grandson had his second surgery in February and he's

doing fabulous. I really, really appreciate what you're doing."

"That's what I was telling some people earlier," Kennedy responded. "You don't realize, but every one of these people that are here today, I guarantee you, every one of them knows somebody or has somebody that's been benefited by Children's and Gillette."

By the end of the year, Minnesota's Log

A Load committee expects to have raised more than \$100,000. That not only includes funds raised during the harvest, but also from the annual Log A Load golf event, as well as a new fundraiser this year, a Truck Pull held in August. While the money is critical to families around the state, so is the sense of community that occurs when folks from every corner of the logging community come together with a common purpose.

That's also the way Ashkan's mom Trisha sees it. She'd never want her boys to go through what they've had to endure, particularly Ashkan. But he's on the road to recovery, with real hope he'll be as good as new. Today, Trisha sees all of the good that has come amid her family's struggles. Since that Easter Sunday night, when she and Nick couldn't have felt more alone, they haven't felt alone since, thanks to the embrace of their community.

"I honestly think this has been a great thing for the whole community," Trisha says. "So many people have had this story to hold onto. It's been inspiring for a lot of people. I think tens of thousands of people have been touched by this story. It's bringing whole communities together."

Trucking companies and individuals who hauled timber for this year's Log A Load for Kids harvest:

Boreen Timber Harvesting
Greg Cook Logging
Demenge Trucking
Forseen Logging
Kurt Gross
Hoffman Trucking
Tim Jackson
Bryan Johnson
Kennedy Logging
Killmer Brothers
Anthony Learsen
Lovdahl and Sons
Lundberg Forest Products
M&M Logging and Son
Mannco
Mitch Melander
Adam Morrow
Nelson Brothers Logging
Nistler Kowitz Logging
Pittack Logging
Milo Polovina
Rieger Logging
Savich Trucking
Scheff Logging
Ryan Sokoloski Trucking
Timber Transport
Ziembra and Sons

Companies and individuals that sponsored the 2026 Minnesota Log A Load for Kids harvest:

Paul and Brenda Agurkis
Warren Barnes
Compeer Financial
Duluth Tire
Hancock Fabrication
Lovdahl and Sons
Lunemann Equipment
McCoy Construction and Forestry
Josh Michalek
PCA
Pomp's Tire
Ponsse
Problast
Rainy Lake Oil
Rayonier
Road Machinery & Supplies
Sappi
Savannah Pallets
Scheff Logging
Schwartz Excavating and Redi-Mix
Titan Machinery
UPM Blandin
Wabana Excavating
West Fraser

All photos for this story were provided by Ben Sunne at Up North Anything Photography, unless otherwise noted. More photos and drone video from the Log A Load harvest can be found at bensunne5920.smugmug.com