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Pony Up Racing team driver Jack Cruz, left, made it to the finish line in Nuevo Laredo with the help of a navigator from another team who stepped in when Gexa's team navigator suffered from food poisoning.

Gexa's Pony Up Racing Team takes fundraising south of the border

It sounds more like a Hollywood movie plot than a real-life fundraiser.

Inspired by a co-worker's son, 11-year-old Nathaniel Foster who is battling leukemia, Gexa Energy LP solution sales manager Jay Beasley and a team of volunteers known as the Pony Up Racing Team hatched a plan: They'd race a 1966 Ford Mustang 2,000 miles across the rough terrain of Mexico to raise money to help children with cancer.

The event is the La Carrera Panamerica, a 57-year-old road race that begins each year at Oaxaca near Mexico's southern tip and ends at Nuevo Laredo on the Texas border. It requires that all race cars be "vintage," or made before 1966.

Pledges, along with \$37,000 raised at a kick-off party in June, go to the Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Family Alliance.

Although it begins in a tropical climate, the race route goes from sea level to high altitude, with temperatures going from hot and humid to only 2 degrees above

freezing in 72 hours. The road is cleared by the Mexican Highway Patrol, which travels with the race.

"We go through all terrain, mountains, plains, twists and turns," said Beasley shortly before leaving on the trip to Mexico. "We basically had to trust a lot of guys who have done this kind of racing before and built the car to their specifications."

The team's Web site (www.ponyupracing.org) documents with photos the transformation of its Ford Mustang from "junk" to race car status with the help of sponsors and volunteers. When it was finally ready for inspection by race officials, the car traveled to Mexico by trailer Oct. 20. The race began on Oct. 26 and took seven days.

"Our goal is to finish the race safely and raise a lot of money for kids with cancer," Beasley said before the race.

Despite mechanical problems, the Pony Up team finished 48th out of the 96 teams.

Nicole Bradford