

Ride with Earnhardt a big thrill for Valley man

By Justin Doom

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

Anthem resident John Calhoon has been an avid racing fan for more than 40 years, and for the past two weeks, his wife, Michelle, has fully understood why.

Calhoon, 58, was one of three Wrangler Jeans national contest winners who on Oct. 17 traveled to Charlotte, N.C., to ride along with NASCAR star Dale Earnhardt Jr. Calhoon was allowed one guest, so he took Michelle, who encouraged him to enter the contest online and who also received a firsthand racing experience.

"My wife was never really a race fan, but she got to go along with one of the Petty instructors," said Calhoon, referring to the professional drivers of the Richard Petty Driving Experience. "She got out of that car, and after going 170 mph, she said, 'I understand why you get so excited about that.'"

Calhoon, in addition to zip-



HAROLD HINSON

NASCAR star Dale Earnhardt Jr. is flanked by Anthem's John and Michelle Calhoon at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord, N.C.

ping along at more than 170 mph with Earnhardt Jr. for three laps on the Lowe's Motor Speedway, spent eight laps in a Petty car chasing an instructor around the 26-degree banked track. He often exceeded 120 mph.

After riding around the track in the instructors' van to get a better feel for it, Calhoon left pit row approximately 100 yards behind an instructor.

"He picked up speed each lap once he determined what our comfort level was," Calhoon said. "With the 26-degree banks, even an inexperienced driver can go around there pretty comfortably."

Calhoon has previous driving experience, spending the better part of 15 years involved in SCCA racing, building and racing cars primarily for road courses.

"I've been interested in racing ever since I started to drive," Calhoon said. "NASCAR's great fun, it's a fantastic American pastime, and having met (Dale) Junior, he's certainly a wonderful representative of the sport and as nice a man as you'd ever want to meet."

Calhoon said he had long been a fan of Dale Earnhardt Sr. before his chance to ride with Junior.

"You certainly feel safe and secure sitting next to someone that talented," Calhoon added. "But those walls are a little scary. We didn't have walls on road courses."