

## Parenting & Education

# STUDENT DOESN'T LET WHEELCHAIR STOP HER

By Laura Agadoni

You first notice the wheelchair-accessible ramp coming down from the school bus, but you are then quickly captivated by positive energy coming from inside. "Oh Lily are you staying here today, oh good!" was what was heard. A girl with the biggest smile you could imagine (with infectious dimples that you would pinch if she were a little younger) emerges. "I was born with this thing called spina bifida," said twelve-year-old Christina Young.

According to the Spina Bifida Association, about 70,000 people in the United States live with this deficiency, the most common permanently disabling birth defect. "Grandma Cindy" explained that in Christina's case, her spine did not close properly. Cindy said that Christina also has scoliosis, and that up until two years ago Christina would lean over in her chair, almost sliding out. A rod placed in her back allows Christina to sit up straight. She has been in a wheelchair since just before her second birthday.

But that didn't stop Christina from becoming an excellent athlete. "She was very determined as a baby," remembered Cindy. "She crawled; she climbed up on couches, even without being able to stand. She's a jock."

Basketball is Christina's favorite sport. "You should see how she gets around on the basketball court," said Cindy. And Christina has more trophies and plaques than you could count, both for basketball and soccer. "I used to play for AAASP," said Christina. That stands for the American Association of AdaptedSports™ Programs, Inc., a Georgia-based interscholastic sports league for students with physical disabilities. "Now I play with Blaze." BlazeSports America is a direct legacy of the 1996 Paralympic Games held in Atlanta.

Christina's goal is to play wheelchair basketball in college and perhaps become a Paralympic player herself. Her school of choice is the University of Georgia. However, according to Christina, UGA doesn't have a wheelchair basketball program. "If they don't get one by



the time I go to college, then I'll go to the University of Alabama because they have a good wheelchair basketball program there."

A recent highlight for Christina was playing in a Celebrity Wheelchair Basketball game. "I was coached by Josh Childress. He's from the Atlanta Hawks," said Christina.

Like most jocks, Christina loves all sports. "We had Olympics at my school, and I got first place with my dance team. I also got a hero award." Christina explained that teachers select students who receive this award, and

that she was chosen for her leadership abilities. In fact, Christina recently attended the Junior National Young Leaders Conference in Washington D.C. This conference is designed for students to develop and sharpen their leadership skills by examining leaders of the past.

Christina's favorite leader is Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "He inspired the whole country. He never let disability stop him." During the conference participants were broken into groups. Christina's group's motto was "Don't hate. Appreciate." "I really like that saying," Christina seemed to like everything about the trip. "We went to a museum, the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial." They also put on historical skits. "I was Rosa Parks," smiled Christina. But this charismatic girl almost did not get to attend. "My church found out that we couldn't pay for it, and in one day they raised enough money for me to go."

Besides being an honor role student, music is another interest of Christina's. She likes hip/hop and rock and plays the Viola in the orchestra at Durham Middle School.

It's hard to believe that this inspirational, outgoing athlete could ever be shy. But Christina admitted that sometimes she is. "It's when she first enters a room," said Cindy, "but then after five seconds it's gone."

While Christina and Grandma Cindy have a positive outlook on life, they can't help but notice sometimes the stares of other people. That and people "helping" without asking are two obstacles Christina does her best to get through. Cindy noticed that oftentimes people will not address someone in a wheelchair if they are with an able-bodied person. I asked Christina if that ever happens to her. Cindy knew the answer right away: "Christina doesn't let that happen to her!" Cindy added, "Christina may have a handicap, but she is not handicapped. She may have a disability, but she is not disabled." Cindy has taught Christina the distinction well. ♦