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CONCERT/3C



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A fighting spirit

Pendleton teen doesn't let physical challenges get in way of success

By KATHY ANEY
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Despite her small stature, everyone knows when Cassidy Welch is around.

The 18-year-old, who stands four-feet-six-inches, helps lead the Pendleton High School cheer squad with formidable volume. Welch's strong alto voice took her to the state solo competition last year and she often sings the national anthem prior to her school's varsity basketball and football games.

Her friends say that Welch keeps them rolling on the floor.

"She's one of the most hilarious people I know," said friend Kalli Hubbard. "I'm always laughing when I'm around her."

Hubbard and Welch have known each other since they were infants, progressing in similar fashion until elementary school.

"We used to be the same height, but I grew and she didn't," Hubbard said.

Those close to the redhead say Welch faces life with fearlessness and humor, despite physical challenges that began in babyhood. When she started crawling, parents Anny and Doug Welch noticed their daughter did an army crawl, pulling herself forward with her arms. It didn't worry anyone too much at the time, especially when Cassidy walked early. But, then the girl's legs started to bow.

"You could put a soccer ball through her legs," Anny said. "They were really bowed."

X-rays revealed twisted tibias and other irregularities. Her parents took her to the Shriners hospital in Portland for testing.

"It took them about three years to figure out what was wrong," Anny said. "The diagnosis after much testing was metaphyseal dysplasia."

The disorder is characterized by skeletal abnormalities and problems in bone development.

The first of Cassidy's three surgeries came in 5th grade when, her doctor recommended an operation to straighten her legs. Her surgeon would break and reset femurs, tibias and fibulas and install plates and screws. Cassidy was scared.

"I lost it," she recalled. "Eleven-year-old me was terrified."

After the surgery, she navigated school in a wheelchair, then used a walker and finally crutches. Despite the surgeries, her legs began to bow again. In a second surgery, a surgeon installed screws on one side of each growth plate in her knees. In the summer before Cassidy's freshman year, part of each femur was removed and the triangle of bone was placed in her tibias. The surgery included breaking both her femurs and tibias. She spent much of the summer in a wheelchair. Since the chair didn't recline, she washed



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Cassidy Welch, center, leads a group Pendleton Swing Choir members in a singing telegram at Dr. Jason Walker's office on Valentine's Day in Pendleton.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Cassidy Welch, third from right, leads the Pendleton High School cheerleaders during a recent girl's game against Hood River in Pendleton.

her hair in the front yard with a hose. She started high school in the chair, and about a month later, she finally walked. Cassidy was jazzed by her newly straightened legs.

"In middle school, because my legs were bowed, I couldn't wear straight skirts because they didn't fit right," she said. "That Halloween, I dressed as a flight attendant with a straight skirt. It fit."

Except for a brief time of playing soccer in elementary school, Welch's legs prevented her from playing sports. She opted for music instead, learning violin and piano. Even during her wheelchair-bound months, she rolled herself up to the piano and played.

"She made music even though she felt broken," Anny said.

A few years ago, Cassidy discovered singing after two friends convinced her to try out for choir, coaxing her

to the choir room with the promise of cinnamon rolls.

"They said, 'If you audition, you get a cinnamon roll.' So I went even though I had never sung in a choir," she recalled with a grin. "I didn't even like my voice."

She was astonished when she was invited to join the school's a cappella choir and, later, swing choir. Her untrained voice caught the attention of her choir teacher, Emily Callender, who saw a diamond in the rough. Callender urged Cassidy to get individualized voice training. Last year, Cassidy tried out for the annual solo competition and made it to state where she placed eighth in the alto division. She was selected to the all-state choir.

Callender said she watched with awe Cassidy's metamorphosis from fledgling singer to confident alto/mezzo soprano.

"For a while, she didn't have nearly enough faith in herself," Callender said. "It was fun to see her find that confidence. She's got a really natural mezzo voice, an easy, strong sound that is just lovely."

Occasionally, when Callender is gone, Cassidy runs choir rehearsals.

Last year, when the cheer program was rebooted, Cassidy joined the squad. Where she previously attended few athletic events, she now calls herself a super-fan. Her knees complain occasionally after jumps and such, but they don't slow her down.

Cassidy admits she once let the way people reacted to her appearance get to her, but no more.

"I've gotten used to it. Everyone knows what I look like and who I am so I might as well just put myself out there and do what I do," she said. "I



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Cassidy Welch, dressed in her cheerleader uniform, sings the national anthem at a recent Pendleton High School basketball game.

started being more outgoing and extroverted in high school. I was a normal person who started a high school adventure."

The senior might be headed toward a teaching career, though she's not certain. After a recent choir performance at the Pendleton Early Learning Center, Cassidy got a taste of it as the group packed up. One kid came up to her, shook her hand and told her, "Good job." Soon, young students lined up to shake her hand and talk to her.

"It was then I realized that I'm pretty approachable for small kids because they're either my height or taller than me," Cassidy said. "I thought maybe I want to be an elementary school teacher. I've been around kids my entire life. I'm the second oldest of nine. I've always had younger siblings. I know how to treat them and act around them."

Cassidy's mom said her daughter can be as angsty

and dramatic as any normal teenage girl, but she also has a special sort of grit and joie de vivre.

"Cassidy has a zest for life," Anny said. "Of course, she never would have chosen this and she sometimes gets frustrated because of her legs, but she has found her way. She knows she can be all she wants to be. She has a fighter spirit."

Everett Willard said his friend Cassidy doesn't often bring up the subject of her legs or her height, rather she keeps things light with her lovable sense of humor.

"It's hard to keep a straight face when I'm with Cassidy," he said.

"She doesn't let her height stop her," said longtime friend Kalli Hubbard. "She embraces it and runs with it. When she wants something, she's not going to let anything stop her."

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"She made music even though she felt broken."

— Anny Welch, Cassidy's mother