

Overcoming Adversity

Young Coalfield resident aided in dream to walk again despite incurable disease

By Michelle Hollenhead

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For many people walking is a daily activity often taken for granted, but for a young lady in Coalfield it is a dream achievable.



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A valuable member of the staff at Diversified Product Inspections, LLC in Oliver Springs, Coalfield resident Storm Jackson sits at her desk in her office with co-owners Ann Furlong and John VanZyll.

Storm Jackson, 22, has been living with a rare muscle disease called dermatomyositis for most of her life. Not only has the disease made it so Jackson couldn't walk, she also experienced drastic fatigue, skin changes and calcification due to side effects of experimental medication of which she was not made aware.

"Most of the children I had grown up around were accepting, but the ones who came in who were new often thought I had really bad acne or a sunburn," Jackson said.

At seven years old, the disease took hold of Jackson and quickly interrupted her life, including her favorite past times of tap dancing and ballet.

"It made it really difficult to want to do anything, really," she said.

For much of her childhood, Jackson was either home or hospital bound, even spending more than half a year in intensive care and suffering a stroke later on. But then a few years ago her disease started to go into remission. Jackson took that as a sign of hope.

Although in remission, Jackson still had little muscle development, but she was determined to change that.

"I can do a lot more things without worrying that I'll put myself in the hospital," she said of not having to worry about overexerting herself as much for fear of triggering the disease to come on stronger.

To build the muscle back, the best option was to do it in the water. So with a pool at home, Jackson worked in the water. But there was a problem. When winter rolled around it prevented Jackson from swimming and by the time the cold season was over, all the progress gained had been lost.

That's where John VanZyll, co-owner of Diversified Product Inspections in Oliver Springs comes in.

After hiring Storm's mother, Mary Jackson, VanZyll learned about the situation. VanZyll took about \$6,000 of his own money and accommodated the pool with a water heater and a tent to keep the warmth inside. Now, Storm Jackson has been able to make it through the winter months with a great improvement in her condition.

"I've been able to do things I couldn't do before," she said. "I can't stand yet, but I can almost put weight on my feet. I used to only be able to lift five pounds, but now I can lift 10."

But VanZyll's generosity doesn't stop there. He also hired Storm Jackson to do product research and marketing for his company—a blessing for her, as her condition makes it difficult to find a job that would offer such flexibility.

"It was really just by the grace of God," Storm Jackson said. "It's a Godsend—John is a great man. He probably doesn't know it, but there aren't really enough positive words I can say about it. There aren't enough words in our small alphabet to make a sentence to tell him how thankful I am and how important it is. He has added years to my life and gave me a means to walk."

Yet, VanZyll doesn't view what he did as genius, but rather an obligation.

"To me its part of the human family," he said. "She can say I've given great things to her, but she has give greater things to me—her love. I think I've received more than I've given her. Our employees are our family. If God's blessed you with more than you need, then you share it with your family members and your friends. Every time I get to hug that young lady I am just filled with so much love."

Mary Jackson said it has been a combination of positive factors that have contributed to her daughter still being alive today.

"We want to thank everyone that has prayed for Storm," Mary Jackson said. "We know that without God she would not still be here. She has a long road ahead but she has always said and still says everyday with God all things are possible."

Paying it forward, at Storm Jackson's request the pool is also used by three other young people to help them improve their own medical conditions.

Storm Jackson said through it all her motto has been: "With God, all things are possible." She added that she also wants to thank the community for all of their prayers and positive thoughts as she continues her journey toward taking that first step.