

Racing Allows Others To ‘Take A Different Look’ At Student

“Give A Second Chance And See There’s More...”

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“One of the moments that I feel the freest is when I’m running,” Señor Figuero said. “It just dawned on me that Alexis is never free. He’s always with someone, he’s never going to really be in a free situation where he can just do whatever.”



After Juan Alexis Hernandez Puga finishes the St. Jude’s Walk/Run to End Childhood Cancer in Charlotte on Sept. 22, his driver tips his chair to show off for friends and family.

Photo by Kailey Cota

Señor Figuero, along with a team of others, began researching to allow Alexis to feel the freedom of racing. They discovered Speed for Need, an organization that allows children with special needs to participate in fitness events. Speed for Need provided Alexis with a customized racing wheelchair and a trained and experienced ‘driver’ to push the chair.

“I think a whole new him,” said assistant Mrs. Smith.

“Cerebral palsy is no longer the definition of him.”

“It’s somewhat show that his palsy doesn’t he has it but he experience what

Alexis’ teacher Mrs. Katie Clenshaw believes that running with Speed for Need gives Alexis an opportunity for something completely different than what he would otherwise experience.

“It’s expanding Alexis’ horizons,” Mrs. Clenshaw said. “He has to go everywhere we put him. We put him here, we take him here. Even though someone’s running with him, at that moment – he can’t see the guy – it’s just freedom for him.”

Olivia Kuebler (‘19) believes this newfound freedom will stay with Alexis for life.

“He has seen that being in the chair doesn’t limit him from things like racing – so even though I don’t think it gives him a second chance at a normal life – It better the life he’s been given,” Kuebler said. “Living a life focusing on all the things you’re missing out on isn’t a fulfilling way to live, and he knows that. I truly believe he is living his life to the fullest.”

Señor Figuero goes so far as to call running a second chance for Alexis.

“He’s feeling the air, he’s seeing the city, he’s meeting people, people are cheering for him, it’s fantastic,” Señor Figuero said. “It’s as much of a second chance for him as anything else.”

Running is not Alexis’ only outlet for freedom; while he cannot control his body, he is strong-willed, intelligent and witty.

“I think the cerebral palsy has made him so strong and persistent to go after what he wants,” Mrs. Smith said. “He’s so restricted, but in these other ways, he doesn’t have to be restricted with what he wants and what he thinks and how he acts.”

While Alexis may not be able to communicate in a conventional way, he converses with his talking device and ‘yes’ and ‘no’ hand signals.

“I thank God that he is loved and we can communicate with him even if it’s with gestures,” Señora Hernandez Puga said. “He lives in the same reality that we do. It would be sadder if he didn’t understand me, and we could not communicate.”

Clenshaw is also grateful that while Alexis’ body may work differently, his mind is clear.

“He’s a really gifted individual in terms of all the circumstances that are not on his side,” Mrs. Clen-

shaw said. “It’s hard enough for kids that have full capabilities to have grown up in another country and be in a family that only speaks one language, yet he gets all of our inside jokes – he’s so intuitive.”

Alexis’ light-hearted personality is supported by the deep love he has for family, friends and teachers.

“I know Alexis inside and out,” Mrs. Smith said. “I will never forget the day he got his talking device, and the first thing he said was ‘I love you.’ That’s an experience that I won’t forget; it’s going to be one of those founding experiences for me, as a teacher.”

Kuebler met him in Señor Figuero’s class last year, and she says Alexis has changed her life.

“Since I met Alexis, I feel like he has made me a better person,” Kuebler said. “He has shown me the true strength of friendship and love; even though he is unable to communicate in a conventional way. He is one of my best friends.”

“He has also shown me how to live life without regrets and how to be thankful for the cards you’ve been dealt because you only have one life to live.”

Señor Figuero admits that his life has been affected, too.

“To this day, whenever I’m feeling sorry about myself, I always think back to him and how much worse it really could be for me,” he said. “And how happy he is, with all the limitations that he has.”

Having cerebral palsy is not a positive aspect of Alexis’ life; it’s not something to be thankful for. However, it has pushed him to overcome challenges and he has become a light in the lives of others.

“He will never probably understand this, but the good that comes out of him having cerebral palsy is that he changes peoples’ lives with his personality and the way he is,” Señor Figuero said.

By looking beyond Alexis’ physical differences, the people in his life have been blessed with getting to know his big heart. While he cannot control his body, he has much in common with us.

“Alexis needed someone to see him as a teenager, see him beyond his cerebral palsy,” Mrs. Clenshaw said. “I think his cerebral palsy is no longer the definition of him. Now it’s just a characteristic; it’s not him.”

Racing in St. Jude’s 5K is one way Alexis transcends his disability. With help from his loved ones, he is able to conquer life’s challenges.

“Take a different look at him,” Mrs. Clenshaw said. “Give a second chance, and see that there’s more than you might initially think. We would miss out on so much if we saw Alexis as a kid in a wheelchair. There’s so much more to him than meets the eye.”

