

A life colored in triumph

Senior Shelby Craig defies odds and stereotypes from the hospital to the graduation stage

Barely two pounds and fighting for her life in neonatal intensive care, Shelby Craig lie beside her twin brother, Will, as her parents, Debbie and Bill, received more disheartening news from the doctor.

Their daughter was blind. She would never see.

Two years later, more discouraging news arrives.

Shelby has Rett Syndrome, a rare disorder that restricts mental and physical development. The doctors say Shelby has developed as far as she ever will. She will never talk. She won't walk.

"You're devastated. You're sad. You think, 'Why? Why did this happen?'" Debbie said. "But then we had to say, 'We just have to look forward. We just have to do the best that we can to try and make it better, but we have to prepare our lives for her when we aren't here.'"

But Shelby had plans of her own.

Despite her condition, the Craig family did not lose faith in Shelby. Her parents gave Shelby a toy push cart and she learned to walk down the long hallways at the hospitals. Following the clicking noise that the wheels made against the tile, Shelby began using it as support to make little steps.

Then one day, Shelby started to sing.

Mimicking the words she heard from adults, the melody didn't make much sense. But the song rang clear: Shelby had defied her doctors. Shelby was only just beginning her life, and she had already beat the odds and shocked her onlookers.

Before long, Shelby's songs turned into full sentences, and as she grew, she began to function more and more on her own.

"We've always treated Shelby as a person who is blind, not a blind person. The distinction is that a blind person is where you want to do for them all the time, where as a person who happens to be blind is a person with one area that is deficient but she can still thrive. We have always tried to give her the experiences," Debbie said.

Shelby, now a 19-year-old senior who will graduate this June, has sung the national anthem for at a Detroit Tigers game twice, she has gone scuba diving, she's traveled the United States by herself to visit different camps, and she's even completed a triathlon.

"We've done very little for her. She's done it all herself," Bill said.

By prioritizing this experiences that Shelby will remember for a lifetime, her parents hope that she will go on to live an independent life despite the obstacles. They do not want her to be afraid of the "sighted world," and they do not want her to be confined because of the fear of going out into the unknown.

"We're really just trying to get her out there. So many blind people are clingy to mom and dad and while I want her to remain close, she's got to be her own person. She's got to live her own life and make herself happy," Debbie said.

Because of the unique things that Shelby has gotten to experience, Shelby has big dreams for herself.

"I want to be the first blind person in space," Shelby said.

Shelby is Wando's only blind student, and with that comes misconceptions about Shelby's ability to complete tasks, but she knows that that kind of reaction is expected.

"When I walk through high school sometimes I get this feeling that everyone's watching me. Like there's a dozen tiny cameras trained on every step that I make," Shelby said. "I know that there's some people here in high school who when I walk down the hallways they do gymnastics and acrobatics over my cane and then laugh, but I know not to listen to them because really and truly I'm going to prove them wrong some day," Shelby said.

Shelby says miniscule things such as outward appearance do not matter to her at all. Shelby isn't interested in what brand of jeans a person has on, but rather what they have to say to her.

Shelby will graduate Wando High School on June 4. By simply walking up to receive her diploma and saying "thank you," Shelby will defy the odds placed against her at birth.

"Keep an open mind. Looks can be deceiving sometimes so don't use them all the time," Shelby said. "Just because you have all of your senses, some other people may not, and those people can do just as much as you can. I promise."

-Taylor Scott



Shelby Craig, age 3

