



WTF, FAD? to answer a question regarding our resume. I was asked which of the 500 classical orchestral pieces on my phone was the strangest." D'Alessandro said. *Photo provided by Gabrielle D'Alessandro.*



WAS most nervous about this portion of the competition, talent. It's actually a funny story because I messed up a portion and came off stage crying, but no one knew I had messed up," D'Alessandro said. *Photo provided by Gabrielle D'Alessandro.*



WACUPS for Curves was the first fundraiser I put together for scoliosis research. It was a lot of work to say the least but I was able to raise over 1,000 dollars for the Scoliosis Research Society, and it was a lot of fun!" D'Alessandro said. *Photo provided by Gabrielle D'Alessandro.*

BENT NOT BROKEN

*Design by Colton Taylor.
Photo by Emma Zipperer.*

Gabrielle D'Alessandro (12) raises scoliosis awareness through pageants

SHE stood under a spotlight of shoddy gym lighting.

Her footsteps echoed across the gym floor stage.

Her pageant dress hung on a closet hanger back home. Her crown was nowhere to be found.

Her audience was not filled with pageant judges, but with middle school critics.

She stopped center-stage and took a deep breathe.

"How many of you have ever heard of scoliosis?," she asked.

Blank expressions and an awkward silence followed, reminding Gabrielle D'Alessandro (12) of her own reaction a few years before. She was once the ill-informed middle schooler, confused when a nurse randomly pulled her out of class one afternoon.

"Nurses just pulled [my classmates and I] out into the hall. They had us bend down and they were looking at our backs," D'Alessandro said. "They don't tell you what [they are doing]. I knew nothing [about] what was going on."

An unexpected letter in the mail the next day informed her. The note, addressed to her

parents, was simple: she may have scoliosis, and she needed to seek medical attention.

"[My family and I] didn't even know something was wrong. The note in the mail was like, 'Here's an appointment, go to this orthopedist, and get an x-ray done,'" D'Alessandro said. "We didn't even know what scoliosis was, [but] we did [what the letter instructed]."

Her first trip to an orthopedic office confirmed the nurse's assumptions. The x-ray image glowed at her, bright as a star. Doctors told her she had scoliosis, an abnormal curvature of the spine. Her spine was at a 25 degree curve, a point at which she should have been braced. She was not.

"Twenty-five degrees is, like, right at [the degree] where [scoliosis patients] are supposed to [get a] brace. However, I was a Risser [stage] four, which means I was pretty much done growing. And scoliosis is something that occurs progressively during puberty, so [I was told] there was no point [in getting a brace]," D'Alessandro said. "[Doctors told me] it [was] not going to get worse. They were like, 'Come back in six months we'll just check it again.'"

She followed the doctor's orders, returning

in monthly increments to check the spinal curve. At 36 degrees, orthopedists began to worry. At 42 degrees, they regretted not using a brace. At 54 degrees, they realized a brace was no longer a viable option.

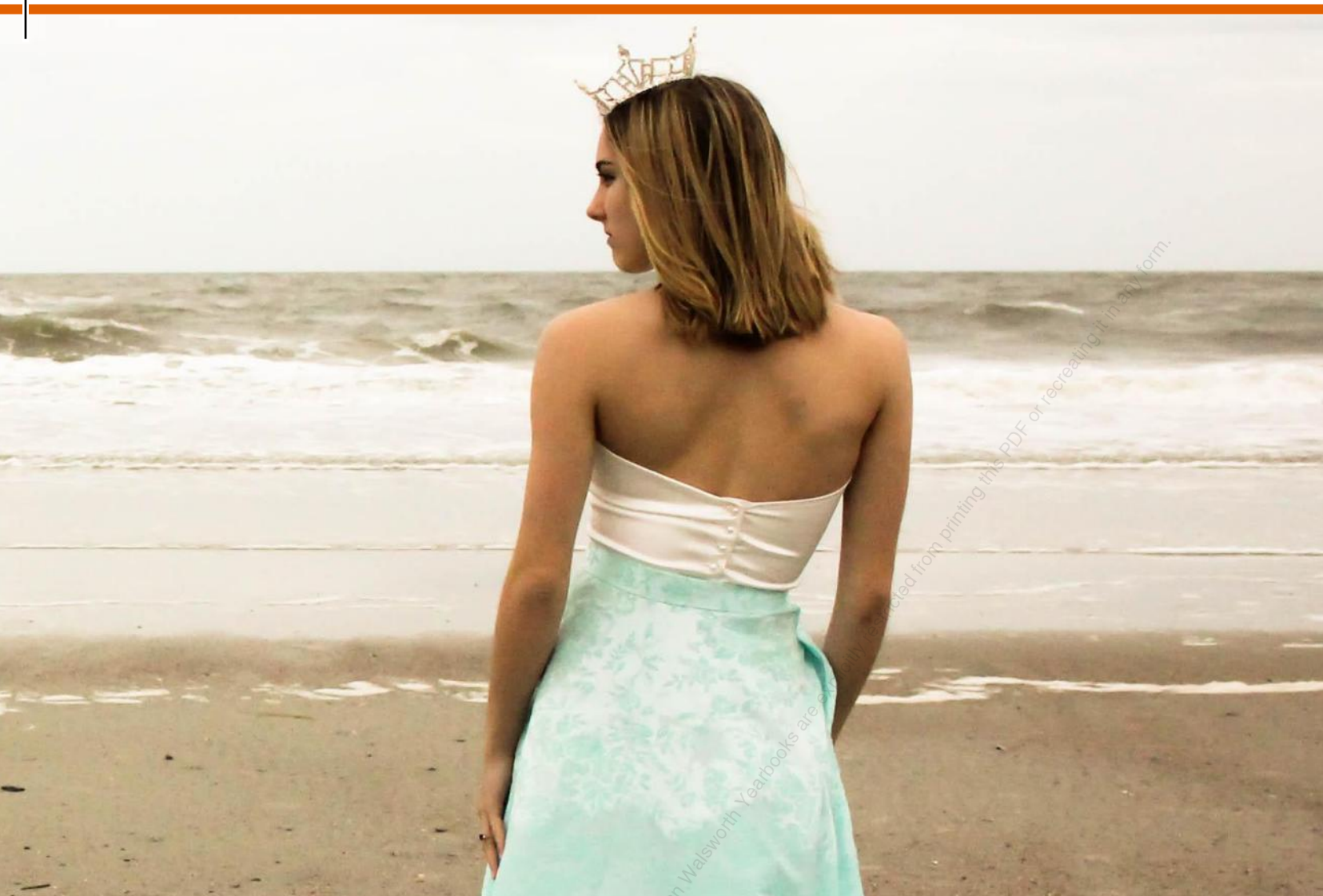
"[The orthopedists] were like, 'Okay, so, we'll see you in three months and if it's got any [worse], we're gonna have to really, like, consider surgery at this point because it's not supposed to be getting this progressively [worse]," D'Alessandro said. "[They told me] I am completely done growing and [the change] is kinda scary."

Yet D'Alessandro's focus was not on her own pain.

It was on keeping others from experiencing the same pain.

She moved past the daily therapeutic exercises. She worked through the class periods when back pain forced her out of her desk. She fought fears of surgery rehabilitation. She focused her attention on scoliosis awareness opportunities, starting with middle school students.

"I [talk] to schools before screenings so [students would] know what scoliosis is,"



D'Alessandro said. "It was just so cool because I [asked them] if they knew what scoliosis is and it was like crickets. When I explained it they were like, 'Oh my gosh, that is the coolest thing ever.' [It started as] nothing too serious."

Wanting to expand her outreach, D'Alessandro searched for opportunities beyond local schools. During one of her therapy sessions, a therapist told her about a national support group for girls with scoliosis. After the visit, D'Alessandro became involved with Curvy Girls Scoliosis, eventually starting her own local chapter in Savannah.

"I found out about [Curvy Girls Scoliosis] from one of my therapists and she was like 'you should see if there's a group in Georgia or something,'" D'Alessandro said. "So I looked it up and there was one in Atlanta and I was like, 'I want to start one in Savannah' so I called [the founder] and was like, 'Hey, I really want to start a group in Savannah.' It was a whirlwind from there."

Her next project served as the backbone for her scoliosis awareness journey. D'Alessandro chased her dream of competing in pageants, starting with Miss Georgia Teen USA. While

preparing for one of the competitions, a makeup artist told her about another pageant-Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen-a program focused on girls' talents and passions.

"[My makeup artist] was like, 'You have scoliosis, why are you not doing Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen?'" D'Alessandro said. "I didn't know about it. I didn't really get a push on [awareness opportunities] until I started doing the Miss America pageants."

As a Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen competitor, D'Alessandro could focus on both scoliosis awareness and pageantry. She continued to give to others through raising awareness while enjoying the pageants she dreamed of competing in.

"I knew I wanted to do pageants. I'm kinda a girly girl at times, I like dressing up. I was just looking up pageants like, 'Why not?' and I was going to do Miss Georgia Teen USA, which was another system," D'Alessandro said. "[But] that one doesn't have a talent nor a platform. I wanted an opportunity to share my platform."

D'Alessandro's platform, titled 'Bent Not Broken: Raising Scoliosis Awareness,' focused

on scoliosis education. D'Alessandro used the platform as both a voice and a vehicle to raise money for awareness.

"With [Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen pageants], you have a platform so [you talk about] something that's really dear to you, like bullying and cancer," D'Alessandro said. "In my case, [it was] scoliosis."

She walked to the center stage, taking a deep breathe.

The pageant dress draped over her curved back. She

looked out at the audience, filled not with middle school students, but with pageant judges.

Her footsteps echoed across the stage as she stood under the gleaming spotlight.

She shared her story- a story of x-ray images black as night, of long and bewildering paths, of rehabilitation and restoration. A story whose last words earned her the crown.

"After all," D'Alessandro said. "We are bent, but certainly not broken." *Story by Abby Brumm.*

"[The orthopedists] were like, 'we're gonna have to really consider surgery.'"
Gabrielle D'Alessandro