

Just two years since moving from Ukraine,

Allen racks up medals, finds joy in new home

■ Gabby Norman
Staff Writer

At any given time, there is a 95% chance that junior Jacob Allen has some sort of Ukrainian chocolate tucked away in his backpack. Chocolate and sugar are his favorite foods, even though the state champion wheelchair racer knows it doesn't make for a winning diet.

"Two days before a race, he has spaghetti, but he doesn't like pasta sauce, so he eats spaghetti noodles with ketchup and grilled chicken," his mom, Sheela Allen said.

The thought of his pre-game routine draws a contagious smile across Jacob's face.

"[I will] eat ketchup with anything, including mashed potatoes," he said.

Valera "Jacob" Allen was born in Ternopol, Ukraine, 17 years ago with Spina Bifida, a birth defect that occurs when the spine and spinal cord don't form properly. This causes Jacob to use a wheelchair. He can walk with the help of crutches, but the wheelchair provides him with more mobility.

Because his father had passed away and his mother was sick, Jacob was placed in a Ukrainian orphanage when he was six. In the winter of 2015, Jacob came to the United States for a hosting program to spend four weeks of the winter holidays with Sheela and David Allen.

"We fell in love with him the moment we met him," Sheela Allen said.

After four weeks, Jacob went back to Ukraine; but the Allens knew something was missing. In January 2016, the Allens asked Jacob if they could adopt him.

"In Ukraine, children over the age of 10 have a say," Sheela Allen said. "They can refuse to be adopted. But he said yes."

During the process of adoption, the Allens had to make three trips to Ukraine. The first trip is where they went and officially met Jacob, and he had to handwrite a letter saying he wanted to be adopted. The second trip is when the Allens had to stand before a judge.

"In the courtroom in Ukraine, the judge asked Jacob if he wanted to be a member of our family," Sheela Allen said. "Then the judge asked me 'What are you going to do if you stop loving this child, would you return him?' I got teary eyed and started crying, and [said], 'I'm never gonna stop loving this kid.'"

The third trip was where the Allens went to get Jacob's paperwork, passports and Visas to travel to the U.S. Jacob had a green card for a year as they worked through the process of him becoming a U.S. citizen. Since Jacob was over the age of 14, he had to take the Oath of Citizenship. On August 29, Jacob officially became a United States citizen.

Ukraine is never far from his mind. Jacob said he was hesitant to leave Ukraine because his friends and three older siblings lived there, but he believed in the American Dream. He said he knew that if he came to the United States, he would have a better life.

"Better than Ukraine," Jacob said. "There's a war in Ukraine with Russia, so it's a little bad in the country. Different people, they look very sad sometimes. In Ukraine, they never help you. They are very bad when people walk around asking for money. They ignore them. Sometimes they park in a wheelchair spot; and in Ukraine, there are very bad roads."

Jacob started at Kingwood Park in January 2016. He spoke Ukrainian, Russian and could understand Polish, but didn't know any English.

Since Jacob was treated no differently than any other student in KPARK, he needed a PE credit. When a friend introduced the Allens to the sport of wheelchair racing, they took to the idea. They introduced Jacob and a sport brand new to Humble ISD to boys head track coach Chris Elliott.

"I was worried about having the knowledge necessary to allow him to be a good athlete because it was brand new to me and to a lot of other people," said Elliott, who has coached for 19 years. "I was probably more worried about that, making sure he received what he deserved as far as coaching goes."

The first time Jacob tried to practice, it was painful.

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"My hands bled from rubbing against the wheels, and I didn't know how to sit in it. I had trouble with the gloves, and even though I was tired, I had to keep pushing myself to do more."

- junior Jacob Allen, on the first time he tried wheelchair racing



Photo by Sadie Lewis

Junior Jacob Allen laughs as a classmate takes his picture in photojournalism class. He has become much less shy than when he first arrived at KPARK. "On the first day of school, it was new, and school here is much bigger than Ukraine. I needed help—where and which class I needed to go next. I used Google translate a lot. Here is good and (Ukraine) is good, but here is better," Allen said.



Photo by Sara Geiger

Junior Jacob Allen has been under the eye of the Paralympic Committee, and is going to Switzerland this summer for the World Cup. "My hope is for Jacob to become a leader, and to be a good role model for other kids, because Jacob can't be the only paralympic athlete," Jacob's mom Sheela Allen said. "I want him to become an ambassador to educate other people about opportunities."

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He was a quick learner, though. It wasn't long before he excelled at it.

When he's racing, he said all that he thinks is, "Push. Just go fast, faster, faster, faster."

In his first race, a 100-meter dash, Jacob clocked in at 20 seconds. Over the course of the year, Jacob qualified for the state championships in the 100, 400, and the shot put.

Finally, due to all of his hard work and determination, Jacob placed 1st in the state for the 100-meter dash, clocking in at 16 seconds. He also took second place in the 400 and fourth in the shot put. Over the summer, Jacob went to Junior Nationals and Nationals. He had strong showings at both.

"He already has that competitive drive, and he understands the type of work it takes to be really good... As far as everything else, Jacob just has that natural ability. Some people call it the 'It factor,'" Elliott said.

Allen has interests beyond the track. He loves to draw and go to the movies with his friends. He gets donuts with his mom almost every day after school. He loves Russian rap and playing video games.

Jacob has had a hard time adjusting to the American way of life, but one of the hardest things has been the language barrier. Google translate was a big aspect of his early days, but Jacob now is becoming increasingly proficient at English.

Whenever Jacob doesn't want to do something, Elliott said, Jacob always smiles and tells him, "I don't understand," or, "I speak no English."

"He's a very caring young man, he's a very happy young man, and he knows more English than he pretends to," Elliott said.



Photo by Sara Geiger

Jacob said he hopes to pass all of his classes and EOCs so that he can graduate. He wants to attend the University of Illinois.

"In KPARK, all the people can walk, and I feel a little different, like I can't do things," Jacob said. "I want to play soccer, but I can't because I can't walk very fast, can't go big distances. The University of Illinois is a premier training spot for Paralympians that go to the Paralympics. There are a lot of Olympic champions that go there."

Throughout all of this, one could assume that the state champion may detest his condition, but Jacob has maintained his easy-going and sunny disposition.

"I think my Spina Bifida is good for me and my body. I think it has helped me by letting me know what I am really good at."

Mrs. Allen puts it the best.

She said, "The wheelchair isn't Jacob, it's not even a part of Jacob, it's something he uses. Jacob is Jacob."

Jacob Allen practices almost every day, and has lofty goals for this year. He hopes to drop four seconds off of his 400-meter and 2 seconds off of his 100-meter. Track coach Chris Elliott said, "The kids really respect him because they see the work he puts into it."