

Where there's a will there's Elizabeth

You may have seen her at Stouffville District Secondary School, zipping through the halls in a wheelchair.

You may have seen her in Stouffville United Church, seated with her family near the front of the sanctuary.

You may have seen her at Parkview Home, using her beautiful voice to entertain residents of senior age.

You may have seen her at Stouffville's Wal-Mart, welcoming customers as they enter the main doors.

Elizabeth Carr is everywhere. Or so it seems. But not without difficulty.

This 19-year-old Stouffville resident is challenged by a malady called spina bifida. She's lived with it since birth.

Spina bifida is a defect involving close to 70,000 people in North America.

The spina bifida parent association describes it as "a neural tube defect that happens during the first month of pregnancy when the spinal column doesn't close completely."

Whatever the internal complications, what one sees is what one gets.

With respect to Elizabeth, it's a vibrant whirling dervish, bound and determined to defeat all odds and accomplish everything she can.

With the co-operation of a compassionate church and community, nothing deters her determination.

Elizabeth is the eldest of three girls in the family of Brian and Theresa Carr.

Sarah, 17, is a student in grade 11 at Stouffville Secondary. Melissa, 14, is in grade 8 at Orchard Park Public School. She has a dog called Molly and two cats, Jessie and Casey.

Following graduation from Orchard Park, Elizabeth entered a whole new world at Stouffville Secondary.

A bus would pick her up at 8:30 a.m. and return her home at 3:30 p.m. For the most part, she found school, both elementary and secondary, wheelchair accessible.

"Every so often, the elevator going down to the pit, (music room), would malfunction.

"I'd have to go outside and enter by a rear door," she explained. Other than this, everything was "super," she said, including double automatic doors.

In teachers Miriam Sellick-Smith, Effie Marinis and Shelley Ireland she found "amazing" friends.

"I loved them," she said. The majority of students were helpful also, she adds, including close companions Megan Good, Danielle Clarkson, Melissa Brooks and Jolene Courtemanche.

A crowning achievement was high school graduation in June. In addition to her diploma, she received the coveted Harry Bowes award.

To obtain sufficient community service credits, Elizabeth did volunteer work at Stouffville United Church, Orchard Park School, Stouffville Figure Skating Club and the Lebovic Leisure Centre.

"I swim like a fish," she laughs. The family has a back yard pool.

Until forced to close, she took lessons at the Therapeutic Riding Association for Challenged Kids in



Roaming Around

with Jim Thomas

'I'd like to be like everyone else. It's something I don't understand, but I'm learning to live with it. There are certain things I'm unable to do.'

Elizabeth Carr
on living with spina bifida

Uxbridge. She's now studying voice. As well as Parkview Home, she's sung several times in church, also read the Bible aloud and led in prayer. Soloists Susan Brown and Jennifer Thunem are vocal favourites. "They have amazing voices," she says, "and are all-round nice people. They inspire me."

Elizabeth credits Marg Jemmett with her involvement at Parkview.

"They love it and I love it," she says. Piano accompanists include Marion Boadway, Bea Jennings and Jean Hammond.

Last summer, she participated in the Strawberry Festival parade.

Elizabeth enjoys her work at Wal-Mart.

"I'm a people person," she says, "everyone's been great." She joined the staff even before the store officially opened.

She's anxiously awaiting a family trip this summer to Darien Lake near Buffalo, NY.

An outside ramp, constructed by her father and a late great-uncle, has made accessing her home much easier.

"Before, someone had to carry me in," she says.

Elizabeth honestly admits the question "why me?" often enters her mind.

"I'd like to be like everyone else," she says. "It's something I don't understand, but I'm learning to live with it. There are certain things I'm unable to do."

But Elizabeth prefers to appreciate the positives, the things she can do.

One achievement was high school graduation. Another, the position at Wal-Mart.

She's accomplished both with additional successes still to come.

Where there's a will, there's a way.

Jim Thomas is a Stouffville resident who has written for area newspapers for more than 50 years.

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