

Graduation walk a symbolic step

Davey Gwidt didn't yield to cerebral palsy

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Publication Date: June 19, 2014 Page: 001 Section: A Zone: NorthShore Edition: Early

Whitefish Bay - Graduation Day is a proud moment for any high school senior. But for Davey Gwidt, the walk across the Whitefish Bay Fieldhouse stage was a fitting finale to a high school career defined by determination, self-reliance and shattered expectations.

The walk across the stage was significant because Davey was born with cerebral palsy. At an early age, his parents decided to raise him with a walker instead of a wheelchair, fearing that his legs would atrophy without daily exercise. At the graduation ceremony Friday night, he not only climbed the steps of the commencement stage, but also grabbed the diploma with his weaker right hand. His twin brother Paul was walking behind him in case there was any trouble - which there wasn't.

Davey brought the house down with a thunderous applause as he walked across the stage. Obviously, it was an emotional moment for the Gwidt family as well.

"It's a reflection of his life," Gwidt's father, David Gwidt, Sr, said of the crowd's supportive applause. "We are so fortunate to be in Whitefish Bay with this school district, this group of people and this particular class. We're just lucky."

Davey has been surpassing expectations from a very young age. His specialized physical therapy exercises have included horseback riding, karate and downhill skiing. He has also wrestled, golfed, water-skied and jumped off the high dive at his family's cabin.

"Everything he does amazes us," said his mother, Jane Gwidt. "But he's always just been Davey to us. He always just did what we did."

As you might be able to tell, the Gwidts didn't coddle Davey growing up. And Davey has always pushed himself as well.

"Whenever the doctor said, 'Oh no he's not going to be able to do this,' they said, 'Yes he can,'" Davey said.

"They never stopped believing in me."

The fact that his parents always pushed him to be independent may have contributed to Davey's self-confidence and insistence that he be treated the same as everyone else. Although he isn't able to play high school sports, that hasn't stopped him from joining the action by announcing freshman and junior varsity football games, as well as varsity baseball games. Davey's sense of humor and sports knowledge has made him a crowd favorite at Blue Dukes events.

A die-hard sports fan, Davey has always dreamed of going to UW-Madison - mostly because of the Badgers. This dream will become a reality in the fall, although his parents are a little nervous about the sprawling size of the Madison campus. Davey seems less worried about it.

"If I put my mind to it, I'm able to do pretty much anything I want to do," Davey said.

He has already written a letter to UW football coach Gary Anderson explaining his sports broadcasting experience and writing samples from his sports journalism blog. He asked Anderson for any opportunity to help the team, saying it would be a dream come true to help out on the sidelines.

"While I may not have the physical gifts of your players, I believe that the qualities I do possess, an unceasing work ethic and insatiable drive to succeed, are the same the ones that you look for in every individual that puts on a Wisconsin uniform," Davey wrote in his letter to Anderson.

Davey's acceptance to Madison will also mark the first time he has been separated from his twin brother Paul, who will play soccer for the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. Although Davey has been mostly independent throughout his childhood years, he has had a strong advocate and friend in his brother Paul, who has every confidence that his brother will continue to be independent in his next chapter.

"Not many kids that have (Cerebral Palsy) are able to waterski or participate in a 3K run or do half of the things he's able to do," Paul said. "It's just a miracle."

Whitefish Bay High School Principal Bill Henkle has also been inspired by Davey's indomitable spirit.

"He's very determined but in such an unassuming and kind-hearted way," Henkle said. "He's just a nice guy that you would be happy to call a friend."

Gwidt's unique personality was recognized with a unique scholarship last month from The 82 Project, a group of volunteers from Whitefish Bay High School's Class of 1982. The group awards a \$2,000 scholarship to a graduating senior, along with a lifetime guarantee of mentoring and networking assistance.

"We really saw that community ethic in Davey," said Geoff Heeren, the founder of The 82 Project. "Through all of his volunteer work it became obvious that he's found community, and he's found friends. We know he's going to be successful in whatever he pursues."

In his scholarship application essay, Gwidt recalled one of his favorite sports memories: when the Whitefish Bay basketball team won the Division 2 state basketball championship in 2011. As students jumped up and down in celebration of the win, one senior student hoisted Davey - a freshman at the time - up on his shoulders so he could join the excitement of the celebration.

That moment was indicative of the support that Davey continued to feel throughout the rest of his years in Whitefish Bay.

"They've supported me and given me the confidence to always be persistent in whatever I want to do," he said.

"Working through this disability is hard, but it's easier knowing the whole community has your back."

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