

A Cool Kid

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GARDINER GIRL WORKS TO CREATE AWARENESS OF EPILEPSY

Written By Erin Quinn, New Paltz Times

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Sara-Elizabeth Clark, 13, of Gardiner, was diagnosed with epilepsy when she was only an infant, resulting in long stays in the hospital, seizure medication and some very trying and life-threatening times.

"It was terrifying," admits her father Shawn. "My wife and I had worked with individuals with epilepsy before and we weren't afraid that we couldn't handle the work it involved. We were just so devastated that this was something mom and dad couldn't fix for our baby."

Aptly named after her grandmother, who passed away just before she was born, Sara-Elizabeth, according to her father, "is the most altruistic kid I've ever met."

"We named her after my grandmother and the one word that would characterize my grandmother would be 'altruistic,'" he said. "They both see or hear of a problem and they want to know what they can do to try and help."

As Sara-Elizabeth grew up, she began noticing how many charity events and walks her mother participated in.

"She did breast cancer awareness walks and CROP walks and one day I asked her if there was an 'Epilepsy Walk,' and she said not that she knew of," Sara said. "I told her that I'd like to find one to walk in or create my own to do what I could to help educate and raise funds for people with epilepsy."

Her mom took her to a regional epilepsy foundation and within a short time Sara organized her first Epilepsy Awareness Walk at SUNY-New Paltz on April 13, 2006. Since that time she has helped to continue the annual tradition.

"People always ask Tanya and I how we put together these walks and we say 'we didn't, Sara did!'" Shawn said. "Sure we assist her and provide her with the tools or information she needs to be able to do this, but she's the one doing the bulk of the work."

In the past several years, Sara has helped raise more than \$25,000 from these walks to help support the approximately 40,000 people in the region affected by the disorder. She has provided the New England Epilepsy Foundation with another \$15,000 this year alone.

Her hard work has paid off in a myriad of ways. Her father, after becoming aware of "Kohl's Kids Who Care Scholarship," nominated his daughter for the competition.

More than 13,000 kids were nominated who had worked in some way towards helping others and/or their community. Sara,

after winning the Kingston Kohl's competition, then the regional competition was notified that she had been selected to enter into the national competition.

Only ten children received the national award, which will provide Clark with a \$5,000 college scholarship, as well as another \$5,000 towards the charity of her choice, which is none other than the New England Epilepsy Foundation.

"I remember getting a phone call from Sara when I was at work and she said 'Daddy, there's a big box with Kohl's name on it and balloons tied around it on our front porch, can I open it?' and I said 'Go right ahead!'"

What Shawn noted was not only what an honor it was for Sara to be one of ten children chosen out of 13,000 for this scholarship, but "the unbelievable things the other nine children had accomplished as well. They've done amazing things. I felt so proud that Sara was in that group."

"I never expected to get it because the margin was so slim," admitted Sara. "But it felt great when that box arrived."

Right now, Sara is seizure-free. Over the years she has been able to go off her medication and have long periods of times without seizures, but she's experienced some reoccurrences that require her to be in constant contact with doctors and neurologists to keep her seizure-free and healthy.

As for college, the 13-year-old is the first to say that she doesn't have it all figured out yet. But one thing she does know is that "I want to continue to pursue acting, as well as continuing to become fluent in sign-language; and I want to keep walking for epilepsy as many years as I can."

She's soon headed off to compete in a golf tournament with her family to help raise money for epilepsy.

To learn more about Sara and her slew of projects, hobbies, passions and experiences with epilepsy, log onto her website www.itsnotwhoiam.com, which she launched this year to help create awareness of the condition.

Correction notes: [1] Sara works with the Epilepsy Foundation of Northeastern New York, not the New England Epilepsy Foundation and [2] Kohl's Kids Who Care Scholarship is presenting the Epilepsy Foundation of Northeastern New York with a charitable grant in the amount of \$1000.00, not \$5000.00, in Sara's name.

