

Running holds disability at bay for Linn-Mar soph

Written by Sher Jasperse

Wednesday, 10 October 2012 20:07 -

Linn-Mar cross country runner Annie Stevenson runs her own race. Always has – ever since she came bounding into Cindy and Kelly Stevenson's life on an airplane from Korea 15 years ago.

Someone had failed to notify the Stevensons that the final adoption papers had been approved so they could get ready for her arrival. “One day I got a call at work saying she was on the plane and on the way to Des Moines,” recalls her mother.

Kelly Stevenson was out of town – in pre-cell-phone days – so Cindy scrambled to track him down and get him pointed toward Des Moines in time for the arrival of their four-month-old daughter.

The Stevensons had adopted a son, James, three years earlier. “We wanted to have a family and there were babies that needed a family, and to me, that’s all there is to it,” says Cindy.

Five months later, their close family was rocked by the news that their beautiful baby girl had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

“It was one of those moments when the world stopped turning,” Cindy says. But as they took the news in stride and moved forward, they found reason to be thankful.

Overcoming obstacles

Cerebral palsy is a spectrum of disorders caused by disrupted communication between the brain and muscles, affecting the ability to move and maintain balance. The disease ranges widely in severity, in some cases causing intellectual as well as physical disabilities. But it was clear from the outset that Annie’s limitations were physical, not intellectual.

“She was our baby and we knew she was bright and was going to be fine,” Cindy says. “It affects the right side of her body and her mouth. She has working vocal cords and her brain knows words, but her mouth muscles don’t cooperate. It’s as if she has a mouth full of marbles.”

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Unable to speak, Annie began learning sign language as a toddler. “We learned it together,” says Cindy, who quickly “reads” and gives voice to Annie’s flashing left hand.

In grade school, an educational assistant accompanied Annie to her classes and interpreted for her. “But now I don’t need one because I can get around by myself, talking in different ways,” she explains, speaking through Cindy.

“A lot of my friends know the sign alphabet really well, so I can sign with my friends. And I can use an iPhone app or I can write it down.” Like most teenagers, she can create a text message at lightning speed and send or show it to someone.

Battling the disease’s impact on her limbs was more daunting. At age five, as her small legs turned inward, she underwent the first of multiple surgeries to cut and straighten the bones in both legs, place and remove plates and pins, and lengthen her muscles.

“Cutting the femur and tibia, those were the big ones,” says Cindy. “They also operated on her salivary glands so she could swallow her saliva.” Her most recent surgery – they hope her last – was in 2011.

It has not been a road for the timid, but the Stevensons have never focused on the drawbacks of Annie’s CP. “We don’t think of her as disabled or handicapped,” Cindy says.

“I never use those words,” adds Annie. But she will always need to stretch and use her muscles as much as possible to keep her body from stiffening and her legs from turning inward again.

‘I just run’

At a recent cross country meet, Annie jogged her way around the 4K course with a steady but halting gait. A few minutes after the rest of the junior varsity girls completed the race, she crossed the finish line with a relieved smile. Her time – 36 minutes and change.

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The 10th grader has been running cross country and track since eighth grade, although severe allergies prevented her from finishing the track season last year.

“My parents were always telling me I should run, but I wanted to do cross country rather than run on my own. It’s more fun.” Even though she literally runs her own race, she relishes the camaraderie of being part of the cross country team.

“I love my team,” she says. “They are really fun to be around and they are really supportive.” The point is not to compete, she emphasizes. “I just run. I am slower and they can go farther, but I run as much as I can.”

On practice days, Linn-Mar cross country coach Todd Goodell works with her to plan a route that she can complete, providing a ride back to school if needed.

“She does a great job in terms of doing as much as she can in practice,” Goodell says. “We adapt so she’s part of our practice. She’ll show up in the weight room even though most of the stuff she can’t do. She’ll simulate what we’re trying to do as best she can.”

Annie typically runs two to three miles, but has gone as far as four. “I run by myself, but if someone is hurt they walk with me.”

Like her teammates, she’s working to get faster. “They don’t always time me because they have to start the next race,” she says, “but one time the assistant coach timed me and she said she thought that was my best time – about 36 minutes. People said I am getting better and I look stronger.

“When I’m in a race, I just want to be done,” she laughs, echoing the mantra of cross country runners everywhere. “I don’t really care about my time, but when I go faster it feels good. I always want to be faster and do more at practice.”

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It's not unusual for other girls to run with her at the end of a race to give her support – even runners from other teams, Cindy says.

“I've never had anyone make me feel like I didn't belong,” adds Annie.

On the contrary, her coach says, “she's definitely an inspiration. When kids cheer her on and see her in races, it's uplifting. She has good friends on the team, gets along well with everybody and always has a smile on her face.”

She's also an outstanding student and unfailingly gracious, he notes. “She's a joy to have around, and we're fortunate to have her.”

Unlimited horizons

Along with maintaining a 4.0 GPA, Annie takes dance lessons and has been involved with Theatre Cedar Rapids since she was a fourth grader. “I've been in five productions,” she says proudly.

She's on the Linn-Mar Student Council and is a Student Ambassador and a member of Future Business Leaders of America, with a growing interest in business and accounting.

Although only a sophomore, she already has dreams of leaving Iowa for college.

“She's probably the most motivated person I know,” says her mother. “If she wants to do something she will find a way to do it. She's not somebody who will accept somebody telling her she can't do something.”

On or off the cross country course, she'll keep running her own race.