

Special Olympian ‘a light that shines’ at Gambrills school



GAMBRILLS - Walking the halls of the School of the Incarnation in Gambrills, Alicia Gogue’s bright disposition radiates.

Gogue is in her 15th year as a valued member of the Incarnation community, where she works in the after-school program and volunteers as a classroom helper.

The 34-year-old has Down syndrome.

The genetic condition can cause varying degrees of cognitive disabilities and physical challenges, but Gogue’s determination and positive spirit have produced a child care certificate and the honor of representing the United States in the Special Olympics.

Faster, higher, stronger

Her parents, Alex and Junghee, met while both were serving in the U.S. military. She was born in Germany, and her family supported her in a number of activities.

She was 6 when she hit the the pool for the first time. Teaching her to ride a bike when she was 8, her father described it as a “miracle” when he finally let go and she kept pedaling herself.

“My hands just basically withdrew from the bike and she just rode, and that’s when I had tears in my eyes,” he said. “When that happened, I knew that there was potential for not only my daughter, but for other kids who are not afforded the opportunity or given the time.”

He lost count of the medals she's won in cycling, swimming, skiing, bowling and golf in the Special Olympics, where she first competed in 2003.

Cycling took her to the 2015 Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles. Her two silver medals were the only ones brought home by a Team USA female cyclist in her ability group.

Her father remains her training partner, accompanying her on 2- to 3-hour rides every weekend when the weather allows.

"In order to be successful at anything you actually have to work to master it," he said, noting that Gogue bikes up to 15 miles during a workout.

Competition helps her relate to classroom challenges, where Gogue said, "We work through the obstacles, (just) like cycling."

'First Grade Angel'

Alex Gogue said his daughter always loved being around children, which led her to work with religious education classes, first at St. Joseph in Odenton, and now at Our Lady of Peace Catholic Community on Fort Meade, where her family worships.

In 2002, Gogue, through the Community College of Baltimore County's Center for Alternative and Supported Education (CASE), completed a 90-hour Maryland child care certification program. Last February, she completed the Basic Health and Safety Training required by the Maryland State Department of Education.

"She loves her work, she loves the kids," her father said. "Otherwise, she wouldn't be here (at Incarnation)."

Working in the Extended School Program (ESP) at Incarnation, Gogue is careful to keep track of her second-graders as they transition from the cafeteria to the classroom, and the playground to the computer lab.

Since 2011, she has spent the first half of her day on campus in the first-grade classroom of Julie Guenther, who calls Gogue her "First Grade Angel."

"She does anything and everything that I would ever ask her to do," Guenther said.

“She never sits idle. If I don’t give her something to do, she finds something to do.”

As soon as she arrives, Gogue is busy, monitoring lunchtime in the cafeteria, and then preparing for classroom projects. Guenther said Gogue is adept at helping students get organized.

Described by Guenther as diligent, methodical and careful, Gogue does every task to the best of her ability.

“She’s a great example for the kids because they see her work hard,” Guenther said.

Asked how she liked working at Incarnation, Gogue was quick to make a correction.

“It’s not liking working here, because I love working here,” she said.

Matthew 19:14, when Jesus says, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,” has special resonance with her.

“That’s the word (verse) I always remember,” Gogue said. “That’s my favorite phrase.”

“Having (Gogue) is just a beautiful example of how someone lives out their faith in a positive way,” said Guenther, who notes that the children adore having her in class. “I just think that she brings joy every day.

“She just has a light that shines all the time.”