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The News Journal

Delaware people: Sister's love spawns project to help disabled find jobs

BY KIM HOEY • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL • APRIL 8, 2010

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It started as a class project to find out about how people could influence public policy, but became something more for Sara Jastrebski. It became a chance to make a difference in the life of her brother.

"I love my brother," said Jastrebski, 17, a junior at Cab Calloway School of the Arts in Wilmington and brother to Marc, 20, who was born with Down syndrome. "I've seen all the hardships he's faced."

As part of her civics class this year, Jastrebski suggested the students look into how the government could help people with disabilities find jobs. She knew her own brother was going through a job search, so it seemed an easy enough project. When she learned there was not much available in the way of job help for the disabled in Delaware, Jastrebski decided a class project wasn't enough.

She made an appointment to speak to the Joint Finance Committee at Legislative Hall in Dover.

"Having [Marc] for a brother has changed my whole outlook on life," said Jastrebski.

Her projects in the past have included helping with the Special Olympics, and organizing a group of friends to educate people on how hurtful the word "retarded" can be, but this was the first time she took on a public role on her own.

She said she wasn't asking for a handout for her brother, just a chance for him and others like him to learn a little independence. She spoke of the pride her brother would reap if he became employed and how it actually would cost the state less to help him get a job than to support him at home. She thought it would be a wise expenditure.

"I learned that [the General Assembly] spent something like \$30 million to buy golf courses, when they could have put more money toward job programs," said Jastrebski, referring to the state's purchase of Garrison's Lake Golf Club south of Smyrna in 2008.

She spoke before the legislative committee, members of the state Division of Health and Human Services, her family and members of her civics class, who traveled to Legislative Hall as part of a field trip to support her.

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Sara Jastrebski (second from right) spoke to the Joint Finance Committee about her brother, Marc (left). (Courtesy of Deborah Jastrebski)

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"I think it's obviously very special they would attend in support of her brother," said Sen. Nancy Cook, co-chairwoman of the Joint Finance Committee. "I think it's wonderful that anyone still a student has the confidence, drive and will to come and give their views because it's so important."

While her friends were impressed that Jastrebski was so poised and driven to speak, her mother was not so surprised.

Jastrebski always was dedicated to her brother and to helping people with disabilities, said Deborah Jastrebski, who founded "Practice Without Pressure" a program to help people with disabilities to prepare for medical procedures like going to the dentist.

"When she told me about her project, it brought tears to my eyes," said Deborah Jastrebski. "It's really a proud moment. I hope folks there realize how difficult a situation can be."

Cook said she certainly understood and that testimony as passionate as Jastrebski's was exactly what the committee wanted.

"That's the purpose of our hearings, for them to be advocates," said Cook, who said testimony can certainly affect how members of the General Assembly vote when it comes to creating the state budget. "It's from the heart. I praise her for taking the time."

Jastrebski just hopes it will help others understand a little more what life is like for someone like her brother.

"I wanted people to know he's just like everyone else, he just needs more time to do things," said Jastrebski. "He's pretty fantastic."

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