

SIERRA'S STARS

Meet Wichita Volunteer (And Inspiration) Brooke Ziegler

Make a visit to the home of Brooke Ziegler (photo) and the first thing she'll show you is her new front-load washer and dryer. "I love this because I can do my own laundry," she beamed. There aren't many 18-year-olds who actually enjoy doing laundry, but for Brooke, who is wheelchair-dependent, it's an indication of her independence.

Brooke was diagnosed at age 13 with Friedrich's Ataxia, a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy that is caused by degeneration of nerve tissue in the spinal cord and of nerves that extend to peripheral areas such as the arms and legs. Currently a freshman at Wichita State University, Brooke attends classes full-time, works 15 hours a week and volunteers about 20 hours a month, putting in even more volunteer hours around the time of the annual MDA Telethon and other special events.

"Every effort counts," Brooke said. She encourages everyone to find a way to get involved. "Yes, it looks good on paper when you go to apply for college or a job, but it's also fun, because it makes you feel good, and it's an experience you'll remember forever."

Brooke is unusual in that she both provides and receives volunteer services. Especially with the MDA Summer Camp, she wishes she could be a counselor instead of a camper, but her physical limitations keep her from being involved in that capacity. She admits that it's weird sometimes to be the same age as some of the camp counselors, but the result is that she's established bonds with her peer-age counselors, some of which have become close friends.

MDA isn't the only group Brooke has racked up an impressive number of volunteer hours. "In high school I was part of the Friendship Club, which was actually started by my brother," Brooke explained. "We 'regular ed' kids were paired with 'special ed' kids, and we'd go to their classrooms and do things with them." This experience

had special meaning for Brooke because the lower functioning students didn't view her as different. Even though her outgoing personality generally upstages her wheelchair, the fact remains that her bright green wheelchair is an ever-present part of Brooke's existence.

"I used to be able to run and jump and when that was taken away from me, I learned that everyone needs to be grateful for what they have," she said. Brooke is especially proud of her independence

and readily admits she prefers it to being spoiled or coddled. "Being independent leads to being stronger. I want to do as much as I can on my own, but I also think I can admit when I need help and will ask for it."

Because Brooke's disorder is progressive, her condition will worsen over time. She knows she won't always be as active as she is now but until then, she will keep contributing her talents and time to help others.!

Sierra Scott is a spokesperson, freelance reporter and host of "It's ALL Good with Sierra Scott." To contact Sierra or for more information on her endeavors, visit www.itsallgoodprods.com.

