

Scholarship Winner Schinderle Is an Inspiration on Many Levels

By John Dunlap – Editor, SSA Globe

It is often said that the true measure of a person is how she or he handles adversity. Those people who find the inner strength and courage to rise above the bad breaks that life often hands out are the ones to be respected and praised. In our modern world we often tend to focus on the glitz and glamour, when it is those people who deal with hard times with grace and conviction whom we should admire.

Megan Schinderle is just such a person. She was handed an obstacle almost from the moment she entered this world. But now—as a grown woman—she uses her ongoing battle with Treacher Collins syndrome to build a future where she can help others affected by debilitating diseases. Her journey to become a professional psychologist has been aided by being a SSA Foundation Scholarship winner in 2011 and using that money (\$2,500) to go toward her college education at DePaul University in Chicago.

If you are looking for inspiration, you need go no further than Schinderle.

When she was born, doctors quickly realized that something was not right. The diagnosis eventually came in as Treacher Collins syndrome, a rare genetic condition that causes the facial bones to never fully form. Consequently, Schinderle was born with a recessed lower jaw, partial outer ears, and other subtle facial differences. She wears a hearing aid because of her malformed ears. Because her lower jaw was so recessed, she had trouble breathing and was given a tracheotomy at six weeks old. She also required a feeding tube. Thankfully, when she was two years old, a team of doctors at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago performed a surgery to lengthen her lower jaw and open her airway, which allowed the tracheotomy and feeding tube to be removed.



Megan Schinderle has been able to overcome her own physical problems and developed even more of an empathy for people and animals alike.

“Having the tracheotomy removed improved not only my quality of life, but also my family’s,” Schinderle says. “It was freeing and we were all able to start living a more normal life. I went to a public elementary school and was fully included, even though some professionals recommended that I be placed in special education because of my hearing impairment and subsequent speech delay. My parents knew that I was fully able to handle a ‘normal’ education, and I’m glad they insisted because I graduated high school as valedictorian and I know I would not be where I am today had my parents not been so amazing and believed in me so much.

“I had many other surgeries after the jaw surgery, but none were as major as that. All of my surgeries have been done at Children’s Memorial Hospital, located just blocks from DePaul, which is one of the reasons I chose to attend school at DePaul. I feel very connected and very grateful to that neighborhood.”

Self Storage From an Early Age

For Schinderle, her inclusion in a normal life also involved the self storage industry.

“When I was in third or fourth grade, my family (parents and grandparents) bought an abandoned building and decided to turn it into a self storage company,” she says. “My brother, sister, and I all helped tear down the old building by hand and my dad, grandpa, and brother all worked on building the new storage buildings. It is truly a family business. I have many fond memories of all of us working at the business—pulling weeds, mowing, fixing the buildings, etc.—then having a nice dinner together.

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"Watching the teamwork between my parents and grandparents has taught me how important it is to have close people in your life who will always be there to help you with anything. I also really admire the determination that has gone in to Eagle Exit Storage (Eagle, Michigan). The business did not boom right away, and only now is my family starting to see the payoff that comes from hard work."

As far as becoming a SSA Foundation Scholarship winner, she always enjoyed reading *SSA Globe* and wanted Eagle Exit Storage to be featured. But it was her mother and grandmother who knew about the scholarship and passed the information on to her.

"I decided to try for it, even though I was unsure if I would be selected for an award," Schinderle says. "I found out that I had been selected over the summer when I was at home. I was so excited and so grateful for the generous award that was granted to me."

And how will the scholarship money help her?

"I'm studying psychology at DePaul University and I hope to pursue a master's degree in counseling or social work," she says. "I would love to be able to help people with craniofacial syndromes or other physical disabilities overcome their differences and accept themselves. Being awarded a SSAF scholarship will help me immensely because DePaul tuition is so expensive and I am so grateful to have received so much financial aid to continue my education at such a wonderful university. I am learning so much not only academically, but also about widening my perspective on the world and important social issues."

Hardest Moments Make Us Stronger

So how has Schinderle been able to overcome so many operations and so much frustration?

"I truly believe that the hardest moments in our lives are the ones that make us stronger," she says. "People ask me about acquiring strength through battling Treacher Collins, but I think it goes further than that. I don't think of myself as battling Treacher Collins because that implies that there will be a winner and loser. I suppose if it is a battle, I'm looking for a truce. I want to be at peace with my facial differences, and going to DePaul has truly allowed me to shed a lot of the insecurities I had about myself from high school."



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"I also think that the experiences I have had because of Treacher Collins have given me a greater understanding of what is truly important in life; it has made me so grateful for little things, and has fostered a great deal of empathy for all people and animals. Sometimes I think about how great it would be to live a day without Treacher Collins, but I would never trade my obstacles for anyone else's. I think everyone has a story; everyone has obstacles to overcome and lessons to be learned. I just happened to be handed a lot of obstacles and difficult lessons early in life."

Schinderle sees her own lessons learned in life as those that can help others realize that no matter who you are or how you look, you matter in life.

"I think it is so easy to fear or judge what we do not understand," she concludes. "So I want to bring awareness to accepting each and every person, despite physical differences, because, in the end, we are all humans and we all need to act with more kindness and compassion."

No holiday message we are likely to hear this year could ever be expressed as beautifully as that one. The SSA is proud and honored to be able to help Megan Schinderle on her journey to help others and, in the process, help herself. ❖



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