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**NEWS RELEASE**

**WHEELCHAIRS, CANES, CLASSROOM STRUGGLES: LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IS ROUTINE FOR UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON FACULTY, STAFF, STUDENTS**

DAYTON, Ohio — Rather than dwell on the pathos of limitations imposed by physical and learning disabilities, University of Dayton faculty, staff and students get on with — and in most cases, celebrate — the lives that are touched by disabilities.

It's an attitude they hope will rub off on others who take part in the programs to be held Jan. 29 through Feb. 2 as part of Disabilities Awareness Week on campus. From singers and dancers with disabilities to panel discussions and faculty exchanges, the activities are designed to raise public awareness and understanding of people with disabilities and the contributions they make to the communities in which they live and serve.

More than a few members of the UD community know the benefits firsthand.

Steve Dandaneau, director of the honors and scholars program and associate professor of sociology, is the father of Patrick, age 7, who has cerebral palsy complicated by a seizure disorder. "He uses a wheelchair, he's small for his age, probably has some mental retardation and can't do much of anything completely independently. He needs a lot of care," Dandaneau said.

"But that doesn't tell you much about Patrick. He's a very precious person. I don't regard his disability as terribly problematic. I don't care that he doesn't walk or never will, and it doesn't matter to Patrick either," Dandaneau said. "He's a wonderful kid who we all enjoy. He's got his own personality despite what others might see as limitations."

Patrick's ability to do the unexpected, to marvel at escalators and garage doors, to break the monotony of daily life, his inscrutability, his lack of guile and anger, and "his pretty eyes, long eyelashes and infectious smiles" are some of his son's traits that Dandaneau celebrates.

He considers Patrick an example for others. "One of the things I want people to learn is that disability is a plastic concept," said Dandaneau, a chief organizer of UD's Disabilities Awareness Week activities. "It depends on what kind of abilities are thought to be necessary in your society. If you can't drive, in our society, that's a problem. In another culture it wouldn't be.

"People with disabilities can help us understand their humanness and our own, that it's a

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mortal one and a frail one to boot. We need to get over that fear that eventually we'll need someone to help us go to the bathroom, because that's not inconceivable. We can have false ideas about our own permanence."

Patrick is flourishing as a first-grader at Dayton's Belle Haven Elementary School.

UD senior Stephanie Grant was diagnosed with a learning disorder three years ago, but she is still coming to terms with accommodating her need for extra help.

"I've had a poor approach to it," she said. "I just suffer and do the best I can. It's a pride thing — I hate to admit there's a complication or a problem. If I overlook it, then it's just not there."

On the other hand, "I could have much more serious problems than this, so this is fine."

The 21-year-old sociology major from Grand Rapids, Mich., struggled through her early school years, and the tests her parents arranged didn't find any cause for her academic woes. At her alternative high school, the small classes and individual attention from teachers allowed her to learn, though she had to work harder than her peers, Grant said.

"Then I came to college and got Ds, which was very hard."

Referred to the University's student disability office, Grant linked up with a psychologist who was able to provide a learning disability diagnosis. "Basically, I have trouble with everything that has to do with comprehension," she said. "The problem is getting the knowledge from someone who knows it in a way that is good for me."

She and the psychologist used to brainstorm about how professors could help Grant in acquiring and testing knowledge, "but that's a big hindrance for them. They're busy and have better things to do than all that extra work for one student who they see a couple of hours a week for one semester," Grant said. She stopped asking for the extra help outside her department.

Grant hasn't made her learning disability public until now. But she has agreed to participate in a panel discussion about disabilities as part of the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Scholars Symposium and Disabilities Awareness Week.

Her reservations are obvious. "There's nothing comfortable about this topic for me, I feel like it's personal. But it's important to do this."

Fred Pestello, professor of sociology who will serve as provost and senior vice president for educational affairs beginning July 1, doesn't consider his disability a major obstacle, although it does restrict his activities and affect his gait. He dislocated his right hip as a 15-year-old playing backyard football. Although in great pain, he did not realize the seriousness of the accident and tried to "walk it off" with the assistance of his friends. A shallow hip socket was a contributing cause of the accident and the damage.

Pestello, now 48, had four surgeries during the years following his injury and anticipates further surgery and a hip replacement as the joint and muscles continue to deteriorate.

"I spent most of high school on crutches and started college using a cane, and I still use a cane occasionally, particularly when I have to walk for any distance," he said. "Walking distances becomes painful, but the limited range of activities in which I can participate is not a major impairment. There are certain things I can't do with my kids that I would like to share in, such as playing ball or going sledding.

"But I tend not to think of myself as being handicapped and have thus far resisted things like having a handicapped license plate, because there are certainly people who face much greater difficulties. I'm not at a substantial level of restriction."

Nonda Schwieterman has lived for 59 years with spina bifida, a condition marked by failure of the vertebrae to form over the back of the spinal cord in utero. "When doctors close that gap, it leaves the patient with a degree of paralysis," Schwieterman explained. "I was originally paralyzed from the waist down."

Her parents and grandparents refused to accept the doctors' recommendations to banish Schwieterman to an institution and forget about her, and she credits her family's support and strong faith for giving her the courage to not give up.

Surgery and therapy "and what I always look at as a miracle," she said, allowed her to regain the feeling in her left side at about the age of 10, which doctors initially described as her life expectancy. Her right side remains paralyzed, but she gets around with minor difficulty using metal armband crutches and a brace to manipulate her right leg.

"I remember asking my mom, 'Why did God have to make me different?'" Schwieterman said. "Her answer was something like 'It's his will that it be that way, and you have to accept it.' Thank heaven they made me do things for myself. A lot of parents, and I've seen this myself, will coddle children with disabilities too much. I had responsibilities at home just like my sister did."

Her sister, younger by just a year, also kept Schwieterman active. "I had a great childhood, a great family. My sister made sure I had friends, and everything I could possibly do, she made sure I was included."

Schwieterman has dealt with ongoing effects of spina bifida and stopped counting her surgical procedures at some point beyond 30. She drives a car with hand controls and, for companionship, shares an apartment with her mother. The pair travel to Texas each Christmas to spend the holidays with sister Linda Peel.

There is a lingering complaint for the 4-foot-8-inch Schwieterman. "I'm so short, I can't really reach anything.

"I think I can speak for most disabled people, especially if they've had a disability since day

one," Schwieterman said. "You work hard to be you and not — I hated it when I was young and people would pat me on the head and say 'Poor little handicapped girl,' and 'How good she is.' I would cringe anytime people would do that to me. I won't have the handicap define me. I feel I've worked hard to accomplish much more than that."

Schwieterman, an administrative data specialist, will celebrate her 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary at UD in May.

The University of Dayton's Disabilities Awareness Week program will be presented Jan. 29 through Feb. 2 on campus. The following activities are free and open to the public:

- Members of UD's music therapy club will demonstrate how they work with clients at noon Monday, Jan. 29, in the Sears Recital Hall of the Jesse Philips Humanities Center.
- Tony Melendez, who was born without arms because his mother was prescribed thalidomide while he was in the womb, has recorded five albums of contemporary Christian music on which he plays guitar with his feet, a skill he acquired as a 16-year-old. Melendez will perform at 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 29, in the Sears Recital Hall of the Jesse Philips Humanities Center.
- A panel discussion will feature John Geiger, provost and senior vice president for academics; UD senior Stephanie Grant, who has a learning disorder; and Robert Phipps, a UD student with cerebral palsy, at 3 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 31, in the Sears Recital Hall in the Jesse Philips Humanities Center as part of the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Scholars Symposium and Disabilities Awareness Week.
- Michael Bérubé, author of *Life as We Know It: A Father, A Family and an Exceptional Child*, will speak on "Disability and the 'Difference' it Makes" at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 31, in the Kennedy Union Ballroom. The father of a boy with Down syndrome, Bérubé is also an accomplished scholar and English professor and director of the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The presentation is part of the University's 2000-2001 Distinguished Speaker Series.
- UD graduate Traci Parks went to work as a self-employed architectural photographer just 31 days after losing her vision. Parks sees light, color, shape, texture and patterns, and that allows her to make a success of Miracle Images of Columbus. She'll speak at noon Thursday, Feb. 1, in the Learning Teaching Center Forum on the lower level of Roesch Library. Call (937) 229-3684 to reserve a seat.

The final performance of Disabilities Awareness Week will be by Dancing Wheels, a professional integrated dance company, sponsored by the University's 2000-2001 Art Series. The event will be held at 8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 1, in the Kennedy Union Boll Theatre. Tickets are \$12 general admission, \$7 for UD faculty and staff and \$5 for students. Call the theater box office at (937) 229-2545.

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