

Finding her place

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For Elaineah Jackson, fitting in among her peers has never been easy. Jackson, 11, of Pampa, suffers from Cornelia de Lange Syndrome (CDLS) which has left a couple of her fingers slightly deformed. But that is Elaineah's only visible physical handicap and, if no one had told you she deals with CDLS, you may never know it just by looking at her.

"If she has it, she's on the very mild side," said Elaineah's grandmother, Becky.

Typical effects of CDLS include thin eyebrows that meet in the middle, long eyelashes, a short upturned nose and thin downturned lips — Elaineah has none of these.

But children know. They always know. They can tell something is different with Elaineah and children are often times brutal and relentless when singling out someone from the pack.

Elaineah, a fourth-grader at Lamar Elementary School, had been involved with a local Girl Scouts troop but Becky felt like the other girls didn't accept Elaineah. The other girls' treatment of Elaineah prompted Becky to withdraw Elaineah from the Scouts.

"We decided to quit doing Girl Scouts because I didn't feel like the girls there accepted her," Becky said, adding that she ended up serving as a scout leader and didn't have the time to commit.

After taking some time to decide what Elaineah might like to try next, Becky learned about the programs offered through the Gray County office of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

"We didn't know much about it," Becky said.

Though she was somewhat in the dark about 4-H, Becky let Elaineah jump right in and Elaineah hasn't looked back since. Her favorite activities in the 4-H program are cooking, sewing and photography.

"Because we get to learn all kinds of new stuff," Elaineah said.

Through 4-H, Elaineah has also baked cocoa crinkle cookies, made pasta salad, learned how to safely cut with knives and she's completed the MyPlate nutrition education program.

Becky sang the praises of Extension Service agent Joan Gray-Soria who has been crucial in helping Elaineah find her place in 4-H.

"Joan is great with them," Becky said.

Soria has also been impacted by Elaineah. Soria gave her regular update at last week's Gray County Commissioners Court meeting. While reviewing the 4-H program's recent activities, she began to

share Elaineah's story with the commissioners. Soria, holding back tears, said Elaineah was proud of herself after she sewed a blue sun dress that featured a bright yellow and pink flower. Soria tried to laugh it off in front of the Commission, joking about how she had promised herself she wouldn't cry. But one could easily see, through Soria's display of emotional investment, just how much Elaineah has come to mean to her.

And yet, Elaineah isn't the only one who enjoys her time at 4-H. Becky also benefits from seeing the joy and success Elaineah has found by getting involved with the program.

"What I like about 4-H is that it's a good learning experience for them," Becky said. "I do not sew."

Becky was a little hesitant at first upon finding out Elaineah would be learning how to sew. She expressed similar, heartfelt concern when describing Elaineah's experience cutting with knives while cooking. Elaineah's misshapen hands could present a unique set of circumstances and Becky just wanted to look out for her granddaughter's best interests.

However, Soria was there to quickly calm Becky's fears. Joan told Becky not to worry and that she would look out for Elaineah.

"They're very helpful with the kids," Becky said.

Becky also noted how the 4-H program instills in the youth the value of unity and diversity.

"The program teaches the kids how to work together," she said. "It brings the kids closer together."

Elaineah has a sister, Starla, 8, who is involved with Clover Kids, which serves 4-H's younger members. Becky and her husband, Steve, also have two dogs: Missy, a Chihuahua mix, and Scooter, a Chihuahua Weenie.

This Saturday is National CDLS Awareness Day. So on Saturday, think of Elaineah and Becky and Starla and Steve, who have found peace and serenity through Elaineah's involvement in Pampa's 4-H program.