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'I felt great'



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Homecoming at Chase High School was a little different this year. The Trojans came out of it with a win and the crowd was full of alumni but it was different because a sophomore, Kaylee Parris, won homecoming queen.

"I had no idea at all that was going to happen. I had not even considered that she was going to win because a sophomore has never won," said Pam Parris, Kaylee's mother and exceptional education teacher at Chase. "We were just honored that our student body had selected her to be on the court."

As Kaylee accepted her crown on Friday, there were tears of joy and cheers of excitement in the stands. After the crown presentation, friends and family showered her with hugs and congratulations. To an outsider, the scene may have seemed like a little much for a homecoming queen ceremony, but the students, teachers and parents at Chase knew it was a special moment.

Kaylee likes to ride horses and hang out with her friends. She is an average teenager except for one thing; she was diagnosed with Cornelia de Lange syndrome when she was born.

"It's a very rare syndrome. At her birth we weren't expecting anything but a normal pregnancy, we didn't know about that syndrome," Pam said.

Cornelia de Lange syndrome is a developmental disorder that affects many parts of the body. It is characterized by slow growth before and after birth, intellectual disability, skeletal abnormalities involving the arms and hands and distinctive facial features.

But the syndrome hasn't stopped Kaylee from pursuing her interests. She competes and has medaled in the equestrian category of the Special Olympics and is the driving force behind Chase's Project Unify organization, a group that her sister Courtney Parris started when she was a student.

Project Unify is an education-based project that uses sports and education programs to activate young people to develop school communities where all youth advocate for respect for people with intellectual disabilities. For the past three years the group has participated in the Spread the Word to End the Word campaign, which encourages everyone to stop using the word retard (ed).


The cause is an important one for the Parris family. Someone called Kaylee that word at school when she was younger and she has not spoken on school property since.



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Garrett Byers/Daily Courier 2013 Chase Homecoming Queen Kaylee Parris waves to the crowd atop the escort convertible Friday night.



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FOREST CITY — “The thing about Kaylee is that people just love her. She is always smiling and even though she doesn’t talk (at school), the kids love her,” said Sandy Clatanoff, guidance counselor and one of the faculty in charge of homecoming. “Our student body is so good and they don’t make fun of anyone with differences. They’ve really taken the Project Unify to heart.”

Clatanoff said she thinks that the sophomore class became empowered by the goals of Project Unify and decided to vote Kaylee onto the homecoming court. She won that vote by an overwhelming majority.

“Her group of sophomore friends were determined they were going to get her on the court. They have been friends with her since elementary school,” Pam said. “As soon as her name was announced that she was on the court, they were in my classroom hugging her and giving her high fives.”

Kaylee’s friends stayed with her through the whole homecoming process. They helped her pick out her dress and went with her to get her hair and makeup done for the ceremony. They also made T-shirts spelling out Kaylee’s name to support her.

When the night finally came, nobody was expecting to hear Kaylee’s name called for queen.

“It has always been a senior. We were just blown away when they called her name,” Pam said. “She was on cloud nine. You just had to be here to feel the love that night.”

After the game, Kaylee and friends celebrated her accomplishment with a bonfire.

“We had a huge turnout from the student body that came down. It was unplanned and unexpected. The love from these kids here at this high school is like no other,” Pam said.

As for Kaylee, she said a few words about the night, but they are the most powerful words of all.

“I was excited,” Kaylee said. “I felt great.”
