



Special Olympics skater awaits World Winter Games

[Ted Clarke](#) / Prince George Citizen

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Four-year cycles are nothing new to figure skater Darlene Jakubowski .

As a Special Olympics athlete, she's built her sporting career around a four-year competitive ladder, each year climbing from regional, provincial and national championships to the ultimate achievement, the Special Olympics World Winter Games.

So after four years of letting her hair grow, Jakubowski sat in the chair Friday at the Loxx Academy of Hair Design to donate her hair so it could be made into a wig for cancer patients. She did the same thing four years ago, having made her first hair donation four years before that.

"I've done this before, it makes me feel really good to donate my hair for somebody who is going through something really hard," said Jakubowski. "I've had two aunts who have passed away from cancer and two uncles as well. You have to have your hair a certain length or otherwise you can't donate it."

The hair she donated Friday was 18 inches long.

Jakubowski is gearing up for her third World Winter Games, set for March 16-26 in Graz, Austria. She won gold in the Level 6 singles event and silver in the dance

event in the 2013 World Winter Games in Pyeong Chang, South Korea, and was the Level 5 solo silver medalist and Level 4 dance gold medalist at the 2009 Games in Boise, Idaho. Last spring, at the national event in Corner Brook, Nfld., Jakubowski captured gold in Level 6 singles and gold in Level 5 dance, which qualified her for the World Games.

"It feels really good to win," she said. "I'm at the highest level, Level 6. I'm working on my (double-Salchow) and my Axel and maybe attempting a double-loop. I'm getting stronger. My jumps are better and my spins are back to being with lots of speed."

Because there is no summer ice available in Fort St. John, where she lives, the 24-year-old comes to Prince George every summer to train at the Northern B.C. Centre for Skating. Until Sept. 2, Darlene and her parents, Leona and Steve, will be living

in their fifth-wheel trailer in a campground in Prince George, a short drive away from the Rolling Mix Concrete Arena. The family has followed a similar routine for the past 10 years.

Coaches Rory Allen and Andrea Ludditt lead Jakubowski through off-ice workouts and she spends five days per week training in 2 1/4-hour sessions with Prince George Figure Skating Club coach Alison Aikins, her summer instructor for 10 years.

"She does work extremely hard," said Aikins, who sometimes works with Jakubowski during the September-March competitive season.

"She can spin forever, most people when working on spins can do a few and then they get too dizzy and can't go any further, but Darlene can spin for a whole lesson, which is at least 15 minutes. Her jumps, we're working hard on, and hopefully she'll have them for her next world competition and that will put her back on top."

Jakubowski competes in Skate Canada dance events at the senior silver level. During the fall and winter she skates in Taylor and with the Mile Zero Figure Skating Club in Dawson Creek, coached by Jenn Harcourt.

Jakubowski was born with Cornelia de Lange Syndrome (CdLS), a rare genetic disorder which causes physical, cognitive and medical challenges. Her parents were told it was unlikely she would ever learn how to walk. Becoming a skater was even more far-fetched dream, according to one doctor, who did not think it was possible considering her condition.

"It's mostly is in their muscles and Darlene is a mild case, but it still affected her muscles," said Leona Jakubowski. "She couldn't lift her head up (as a baby), her eyes didn't work right together for two or three years, and they said she would never skate because she couldn't walk a straight line on the floor. It's been a push."

Jakubowski started skating at age 7 and had to make the choice to drop horseback riding. She studied ballet briefly and that improved her balance on blades.

She has a bit of hearing impairment and has intellectual disabilities but that hasn't stopped her from learning new languages. Jakubowski loves helping out customers at her job at Home Hardware and attends school at the Fort St. John Association for Community Living. She's learned how to use sign language and speak German and is teaching herself Russian and Ukrainian through online courses. She says she can't wait to speak German when she arrives in Austria for the World Games next year.

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