

She steps into volunteer roles

JESSIE DRISCOLL

Sanford H. Calhoun High School

BY SHAMEKA NICOLE DUDLEY
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It's easy to see how Jessie Driscoll can shimmy her way into anyone's heart. As a professional Irish step dancer, teacher and captain of her high school's kick-line team, she has choreographed her life to include a passion for dance and performance with helping others in need worldwide.

"I owe it all to my mother," she says of her quest to help the less-fortunate, which has become a family affair.

Driscoll, 18, along with her parents and two brothers, volunteers in the soup kitchen at Harvest for the World, a nonprofit social service organization serving Roosevelt and surrounding areas, according to its website. The family spearheaded an effort to rebuild the organization's backyard. "It's really, really great to help other people," Driscoll said.

She hasn't met a cause she doesn't like.

Driscoll has collected more than 2,000 cards and letters to send to Merrick troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan; collected more than a ton of clothing and supplies for families in the poverty-stricken Appalachia region of

Kentucky and raised more than \$5,000 herself and more than \$36,000 with her family to help support Long Island 2 Day Breast Cancer Walks. The cause is close to her family's heart — Driscoll's mother, Marianne, is a breast cancer survivor.

During a cab ride in New Orleans in July 2009, she and her mom got to talking with the driver, who was collecting books to send back to his native Nigeria. Within two months, Driscoll and her mom collected enough books and supplies to fill two libraries across the Atlantic. Since 2002, the family has hosted an annual benefit, named Jazi, to support the village of Epworth in Zimbabwe.

"She's so humble and she's just such a sincere young woman," said guidance counselor Carol Cupo. "She's a leader among her peers."

Driscoll's passion for helping others is equally matched by her passion for dancing. She's been on kick line for four years and has been team captain for the past two years.

Driscoll has been an Irish step dancer since she was 3 and has competed nationally and internationally.

When she arrives at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, Driscoll won't have to worry about missing a beat when it comes to her dancing — there's an Irish dancing school two blocks from the university.



PHOTO BY ED BETZ

A longtime autism advocate

LAURA KIRSCH

Ward Melville High School

Laura Kirsch, 17, has spent most of her school-age life as an advocate for autism research and awareness. She participated in a local walk when she was in first grade to raise money for it. Two years later, as a third-grader, she formed team Kirsch with her older sister, Sarah. The team — inspired by Kirsch's older brother Daniel, who is autistic — walks annually for Autism Speaks, a science and advocacy organization. They have raised more than \$50,000 for autism research.

Kirsch, 17, is also on the varsity track and cross country team, and is a volunteer coach for 20-year-old David's running team. She is also a second-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do.

Kirsch, who is taking honors and Advanced Placement courses, is a member of the National Honor Society and has received the presidential community service award. "School has always been very important [to me] and very important to my family, so it's kind of like second nature," she said.

The same could be said of her devotion to her brother, which has spilled over to others. In eighth grade, Kirsch began an in-school program

that pairs the disabled with other students who mentor and interact with them by playing games, baking and sharing library time. The Friendship Circle is an active part of the school's Key Club.

Her plans: To attend Cornell University's school of human ecology and major in policy analysis and management.

In her words: "I hope to study disability law and possibly become a lawyer for people with disabilities."

The view from the principal's office: "Laura is a kind, outgoing, caring individual who takes care of herself and others," said her principal, Alan J. Baum.

— SHAMEKA NICOLE DUDLEY

Firmly in the saddle

GABRIELLA WESSLER

The Knox School St. James

As the daughter of parents who are deaf, Gabriella Wessler understands the importance of building bridges between those who hear and those who don't.

At the private Knox School in St. James, Wessler has founded an American Sign Language Club. She also teaches sign

language, and takes pride in the fact that more than 30 classmates, past and present, have learned basic signing techniques.

Wessler, 18, is also a ribbon-winning equestrian at a school noted for its riding program.

Sprains from horse-show tumbles may occasionally slow her down, but Wessler still maintains a hectic schedule.

She is president of the student council and vice president of the National Honor Society. In addition, she has organized school fundraisers and clothing drives for underprivileged children.

Her latest project is a group effort with her fellow equestrian team members — establishing a retirement fund for the horses who serve the school so they can have a place to live out their final years in peace and comfort.

And the tumbles? Close

acquaintances say they reflect Wessler's willingness to take on challenges.

"She'll ride the horse that's a little bit difficult," said Janice Zingale, a Knox assistant headmaster.

Her plans: Majoring in equine science at Colorado State University, becoming a veterinarian and eventually opening a riding center for the hearing-impaired.

In her words: "A lot of people think deaf people aren't capable of certain things. They may be perfectly capable. My mom wanted to ride when she was little, but the trainer said she can't hear, so she can't ride."

The view from the guidance office: "To me, her greatest contribution is being the person she is," Zingale said. "She's bright and she's active, but she's also very caring."

— JOHN HILDEBRAND



NEWSDAY PHOTO / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

He meets goals with tenacity

RONNIE EITH

H. Frank Carey High School

BY JO NAPOLITANO
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Ronnie Eith doesn't give up. He tried out for the school play five times before he was finally accepted in this year's production of "Anything Goes."

And while he's been a member of the junior varsity and varsity wrestling teams for years, he has yet to win a match.

But that doesn't mean it's not worth it, he said.

"It's one of the hardest sports out there between the actual practices and maintaining your weight throughout the season," he said. "It really gave me a challenge. It disciplined me. I enjoyed it very much."

Counselors who know Eith say it's his enthusiasm that pulls him through.

When Eith, 17, was cast as a sailor in this year's musical, he belted through "Bon Voyage" and "Blow, Gabriel, Blow" like he was on Broadway. "We had the greatest time," Eith said of his theater experience. "We would laugh throughout the entire practice."

Eith has Asperger's syndrome, a developmental



PHOTO BY DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN

disorder that can make it difficult for him to read social cues and to focus on anything but a specific set of interests.

Julie Elena, a counselor who has come to know Eith in the past year, said he was so excited about his role in the play that he would sometimes practice singing in the guidance office and show the counselors his dance moves.

Elena marvels at Eith's tenacity; most students, including those who grow up to be guidance counselors, shy

away from tryouts after just one rejection.

"I tried out for a talent show in the seventh grade and didn't get it and never went out again," Elena said. "But he doesn't quit anything. He tried out for it every year and finally got it in his senior year."

Eith said Asperger's can make his life difficult at times. He worries about saying the wrong thing, though he has a reputation for being outgoing and affable. Testament to that is his selection as the school's Senior of the Month last December, a designation bestowed upon only 10 seniors.

"That's the thing about Ronnie," Elena said. "He doesn't put on any airs. The students have come to embrace him. They recognize this is a real fighter. He puts his heart and soul into everything, and how can you not respect that?"

The latest beneficiaries of that are the school's outdoor benches, which Eith is replacing or refurbishing. He is also secretary of the Carey Clipper, the school's newspaper, and a member of Model UN and the yearbook committee.

Eith said he will remember high school fondly as he prepares to leave for East Stroudsburg University in the fall.



PHOTO BY ED BETZ

Work on epilepsy a personal mission

ZOEY WADE

Northport High School

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Zoey Wade readily admits that high school has been somewhat of a challenge. She holds an 89.54 average, is taking a course for college credit, is a state championship-winning swimmer and captain of the swim team, serves as a mentor and does volunteer work. And she has epilepsy.

"When people look at me, they have no idea," says Wade, 17, who attends Northport High School. "That's been a challenge because I don't look like I have anything wrong with me."

Wade, who was in sixth grade when she was diagnosed in June 2005 with the seizure disorder, said she was in denial and embarrassed when she found out she had epilepsy, which affects various mental and physical functions. "I finally told my best friend after I had the seizure in front of her."

But Wade soon found out that the more she talked about her epilepsy, the easier it became to deal with. "And now I'll tell a complete stranger," she said.

So, three years ago, in an effort to get her story out and help others with epilepsy, Wade held the Zoey Wade Big Bash for Epilepsy Awareness at the American Legion in Northport. Her dinner-dance raised \$16,000 for the Epilepsy Foundation.

And the foundation, appreciating her efforts, invited Wade and her family to Washington, D.C., for their annual walk and to meet with members of Congress and the Senate to tell her story and advocate for

more funds.

Wade didn't stop there, though. She held her Big Bash again in May 2010, this time moving it to the Crestwood Manor in Northport and raising \$27,000.

She attends support groups at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital / Columbia University Medical Center and mentors others with the condition. And to further help her own understanding of epilepsy, she's taking medical anatomy and physiology for college credit.

Wade also donates time to Grandfriends, a program that pairs young people with seniors for friendship. "I really enjoy it because they are so wise and have such great advice," she said.

Wade began swimming with the high school varsity team when she was in the seventh grade and competed through the 11th grade, winning the state championship in March 2008 when she was 14.

"I'll never forget that day," she said, beaming at the memory. She swam the 500-meter freestyle in 5:33:06. And while her epilepsy has kept her out of the pool for much of her senior year, her team still made her captain.

Wade will attend Farmingdale State College in the fall.

"She has a strong, determined spirit, and nothing will get in the way of her goals," said her guidance counselor, Mary Ann Powers. "I pray that her doctors can control her disorder because once that happens, I can only imagine what Zoey will accomplish."

More standout grads; please turn the page



PHOTO BY HEATHER WALSH