

'Do what you want to do'

Grad urged to enjoy life despite obstacles

BY KAYLA WASHKO
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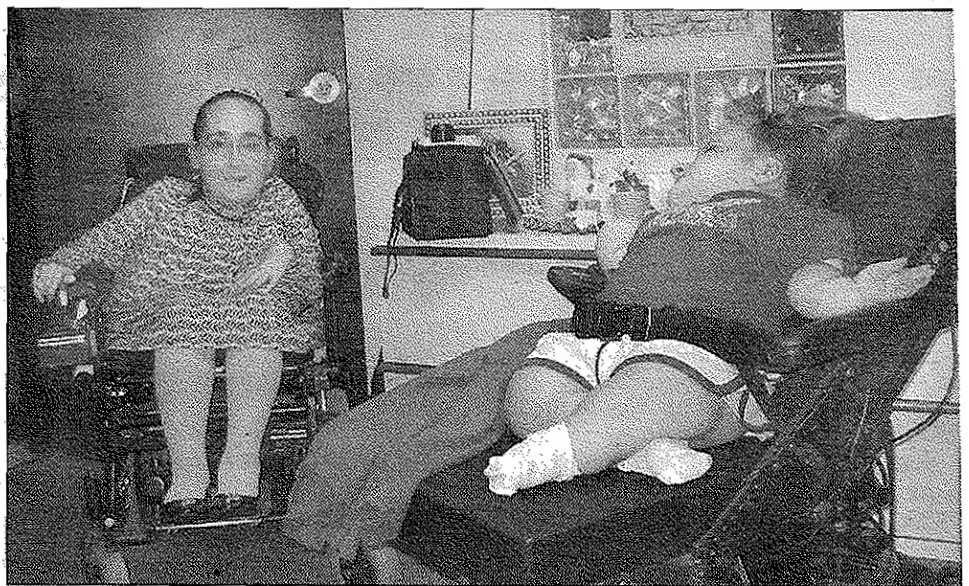
It's not every day that guests at the National Aviary spend one-on-one time with one of the facility's most prized penguins, Simon.

But Victoria Kissel is no ordinary guest.

Kissel, a 2008 graduate of Altoona Area High School, has had a condition known as osteogenesis imperfecta since birth.

Although the condition has impeded Kissel's growth and caused more than 200 broken bones in her lifetime, Kissel's grandparents and legal guardians consider her circumstances both a blessing and a miracle.

"The doctors told us that she wouldn't



SUBMITTED PHOTO

National Aviary CEO Linda Dickerson (left) meets Victoria Kissel at the Pittsburgh bird facility, where the two had lunch and discussed Kissel's future.

live more than six months when she was born," said Kissel's grandmother, Lee Neibauer. "And now, 18 years later, she's graduated from high school."

Kissel's trip to the National Aviary in Pittsburgh sprang from a meeting with CEO Linda Dickerson, whose remarkable life story parallels Kissel's.

Dickerson was born with a neuromuscular disease known as Werdnig-Hoffman and has used a wheelchair her entire life.

Yet, Dickerson has never allowed the disease to prevent her from accomplishing her goals. Her achievements include a degree from Carnegie Mellon University, ownership of a Pittsburgh-based magazine and a nonprofit management consulting group and several noted board positions.

Dickerson answered some of Kissel's concerns about attending college in the fall. Kissel hopes to continue her education in computer graphics and photo editing, but has encountered several obstacles.

"They told me that I'd have to stay overnight in Johnstown for two weeks of testing, or else I won't be able to go to college," Kissel said. "I don't know if I'm going to (be able to) go (to college) now."

"It's a problem because Victoria has never spent the night away from us, and (Johnstown) is over an hour away," Neibauer said.

Dickerson lives independently but an aide is with her at all times. She encouraged Kissel to not feel defeated by minor setbacks.

"You have to do what you want to do," Dickerson said. "It's obvious that you'll have some constraints placed on you that others don't. But you'll also have some opportunities others don't."

Kissel had noted earlier that her "dream" is to have a laptop computer, so Dickerson encouraged her to attend the two-week testing with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation at the Hiram G. Andrews Center in Johnstown. The office helps to provide equipment for students with disabilities.

"I'll bet you they'll set you up with that laptop you want," Dickerson said.

Kissel seemed inspired by Dickerson's advice and spent the better part of their lunch together asking a variety of questions.

In the end, Dickerson made two things clear: Kissel should find what she loves to do and, once she does, never let anything get in her way.

It's good advice for any new graduate, but especially for one such as Kissel, who has defied so many odds.

And it's advice that Dickerson herself has certainly never failed to live by.

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