

These kids are booked...

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Gabriella Almassey, 3, recently completed the 500 by 5 reading program and received a certificate and her picture on the 500 by 5 Wall of Fame at P.D. Brown Memorial Library in Waldorf. The program promotes early literacy in preschool aged children.

Submitted photo

When Kathy and Darryl Almassy were told of their daughter's diagnosis, they knew they would have to come up with alternative activities for their active child because sports would be out of the question.

Gabriella, 3, was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS), an inherited disorder that affects the skin, joints and blood vessels. Gabriella is particularly prone to bruising and breaking bones as her parents saw with her older sister, Jessica.

"There's not a bone in her body that hasn't been broken," Kathy said of Jessica, 18.

After years of hearing from doctors that her daughter's injuries while playing sports were nothing alarming, the family received the diagnosis.

"Our lives changed because it affects Jessica's heart," Kathy said. Though her diagnosis didn't impede her ability to succeed — Jessica was valedictorian of her class at Thomas Stone High School last year — it changed the way the family approached physical activities.

“With Gabby, we know we can’t do sports, so we’re trying to find other things to entertain her and that can be very hard,” Kathy said. “We’re trying to get [Gabby] more interested in reading.”

A frequent participant of Charles County Public Library programs, Kathy discovered the 500 by 5 reading program. Parents are encouraged to read 500 books with their children by the time they turn 5.

“[Gabby] loves to read, but her interest has grown so much through doing this,” Kathy said. “You can see the difference in the interest level. It’s given her a goal.”

“The overall goal is to encourage parents to read to their children and get them ready for school,” Glenda Fields, children’s supervisor at Waldorf West library, said of the program. “We point out how reading increases their vocabulary and speech skills, helps with their critical and logical thinking and encourage them to develop a love for reading early on.”

About 150 children have completed the challenge since its inception in Charles County in 2013, but Kathy said she knows a lot of parents who have never heard of the program.

“We try to encourage parents to read to their children even when they’re babies,” Fields said. “Reading helps develop those critical skills and it’s always the earlier the better and it gets them ready for school.”

Kathy and Darryl also stressed the bonding opportunity early reading presents.

“[Gabby] will sit on our laps when we’re reading and it’s great one on one time we get to have with her,” Kathy said.

Participants log the books they read and can turn it in to any Charles County Public Library once they reach 500. The child then receives a certificate with their name on it, a crown to decorate and their picture is added to the library’s 500 by 5 Wall of Fame.



The recognition is part of what excites kids about the program, Fields said.

“The kids really want their picture up [on the wall] and once their picture gets up there they feel very proud,” Fields said. “Some of them show their friends and it gets spread that way. We see families with siblings and when the younger sibling sees the older sibling complete it, they then want their picture on the wall as well.”

Fields said the program is promoted during the library’s various popular Storytime programs.

“We have posters around the library but I make an effort to talk about it at Storytime so the parents know it’s an ongoing event,” Fields said.

“What do you do with a child that’s active but can’t be active?” Kathy said. “The only thing that’s out there and that’s free is the library. We’d love to see more opportunities for programs and challenges like this. [Gabby] is not the only one that has a heart problem and benefits from programs like these.”

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