

# Betts' stubbornness improves her life

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**CARY** — Zoey Betts is stubborn.

When her doctors said that she would not walk or talk after she was born, she defied them. When one of Zoey's West Lake Elementary school classmates said that they would never invite Zoey to their birthday party, Zoey laughed that they were trying to act like teenagers.

Zoey is not your average 10-year-old.

"I was born with half a brain," she tells people who ask.

Zoey actually was born without 95 per-

cent of her cerebellum and 50 percent of her brain stem. Her parents, Tim and Juli, believe that Zoey had a stroke during Juli's first two months of pregnancy. That is one of the few explanations for her perplexing condition.

Most parents would coddle and protect a child who was born nearly paralyzed on her left side — one who could not walk until she was 2 1/2 years old. The Betts did neither. Instead, when Zoey was 2, they put her on top of a horse.

While the Betts were living in Laurel, Md., Juli read about James Brady, Presi-

dent Ronald Reagan's first-term press secretary who was shot in the head during John Hinckley Jr.'s assassination attempt on Reagan. Brady, who suffered from paralysis in his lower extremities, used therapeutic horseback riding as a way of building trunk control and muscle strength.

Juli Betts entertained all the inherent risks. Zoey could not walk or talk, or even hold her head up, so how would she be able to participate in a similar program and stay on top of a horse?

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## BETTS

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The Betts soon found a program geared for children, called Lift Me Up, in Great Falls, Va., and learned that the program had less inherent risks than they imagined. Zoey would better be able to manage by utilizing four handlers, including two sidewalkers who had a hand on each of her thighs and a hand on each side of her back.

"It's physical therapy on a horse," Juli Betts said.

Each time a horse strides, she said, the rider must catch himself or herself from falling.

Zoey, whose paralysis is limited to the left side of her face these days, has caught herself countless times, and since she began the program she has thrived: she now can jump forward 30 inches, skip and stand on one foot.

For someone missing her vermis, the part of the brain that controls balance, Zoey's obstinacy has allowed her to regain some of the control over her life that she lost at birth.

"Zoey is a very determined rider," said Janet Mason, executive director of Horse and Buddy, a therapeutic riding program at Chapel Ridge Farm near Jordan Lake, where Zoey is enrolled.

Mason's Horse and Buddy program is a nonprofit organization formed in 2003. It aims to help children with disabilities make physical and emotional improvements with the aid of horses and ponies. The program is one of 30 therapeutic riding programs in North Carolina organized by the

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

Horse and Buddy serves about 25 children a week, in half-hour and one-hour group sessions. Riders pay \$30 a session, but Mason hopes to get grants and donations for scholarships.

Zoey is one of her inspirational stories.

"She has learned to ride better than I ever thought she would," Mason said.

Zoey's hard work has paid off.

She trained arduously for the 2004 Special Olympics North Carolina. Her training consisted of an hour in a group lesson on Saturdays and a half hour individually on Sundays. On Sundays, Zoey would begin at 9 a.m. and would do 10 minutes of equitation training and 20 minutes on trail riding. In preparation for the trail-riding Special Olympics event, Mason would have Zoey go through obstacles and over a bridge. She also had her practice backing up her horse.

The trail-riding event is about how a rider controls his or her horse during exercises. To prepare Mac, Zoey's Horse and Buddy program horse and the one she would ride during the competition, Mason would have the coaches ride him, too.

Mason also instructed the young rider on how Special Olympics judges would give directions over a loud speaker.

For equitation, Mason showed Zoey positioning on the horse with her heels down and with proper hand placement. Though Mason teaches her the ropes, she concedes that Zoey exceeds some of her own gifts as a rider.

"I don't think I have as nice of a position on the horse as Zoey," she said.

On the Friday of the Special Olympics competition, athletes were grouped according to their abilities. For the trail-riding event Saturday, riders would ride individually for five minutes; on Sunday they would ride in a group for five minutes.

One of the trail elements included backing up, a move that Zoey and Mac struggled with during practices. But Mason said that Zoey's determination came through and she mastered it.

Then came the wrinkle. On the night before the trail-riding event, organizers made the requirement that contestants had to back up in an L-shaped figure, rather than in a typical straight line.

"I almost gave up and said 'just back up straight,'" Mason said. "But Zoey and some of her other coaches said, 'No, we can get this.'"

Zoey and Mac practiced backing up again and again, until they mastered the move.

Zoey earned a gold medal. She successfully defended her title at this year's Special Olympics North Carolina, held July 15-17. She also medaled in equitation for a second straight year.

After winning her gold last year, Zoey showed her mother the medal. Juli Betts then decided to prepare Zoey in case she did not earn a second medal. Hard work was still needed, nothing was guaranteed.

"I'm going to get another one," her daughter said.

Sure enough. Upon receiving her medal, Zoey went into stands where her mother sat, and set her mother straight.

"I told you so," she said.