Ruby’s Rainbow: Offering Hope, Help and Educational Funding for Students with Down Syndrome

by Catherine A. Morris

Three-year-old Ruby Plachta might be the world’s youngest philanthropist.

Ruby was born in Austin, Texas, in December 2010 — a month early, much to the surprise of her parents, Liz and Tim. Another surprise was in store for the Plachtas: Upon Ruby’s birth, they discovered she had Down syndrome.

The Plachtas quickly realized their expectations for Ruby were the same as for their older daughter: They envisioned both their children thriving, becoming lifelong learners and making important contributions to society. Yet as Liz Plachta became involved in the local Down syndrome community, she learned that, while post-secondary educational opportunities were increasing for individuals with Down syndrome, educational funding for these individuals was nearly non-existent.

Founded in 2012, Ruby’s Rainbow grew from the Plachtas’ desire to do something extraordinary to help this community of inspiring people. “Rockin’ that extra chromosome” has become the organization’s tagline, reflecting its fun, high-energy spirit.

The organization’s Rockin’ Recipients — the students who have received Ruby’s Rainbow scholarships — live throughout the United States and are pursuing post-secondary education in a variety of fields, including acting, public speaking and the culinary arts. They attend programs at colleges and universities like Vanderbilt and George Mason. Some attend informal classes at their local university or community college, while others are immersed in a typical four-year college experience, living on campus with their peers, managing a full course load and anticipating graduation.

And they are thriving, in their university programs and in life. Lindsey Allen, for example, a 2013 Rockin’ Recipient, is finishing up her sophomore year at Northern Kentucky University through the SHEP (Supported Higher Education Project) program for students with intellectual disabilities. Allen dances with the NKU Norse Dance Team and is the team manager; she also works in the university's daycare and recreation center. Allen recently spoke at her nephew’s school about the importance of inclusive education, joining an effort to promote disability awareness among students. She asked students to pledge to end the use of the “r-word” — referring to “retarded,” a term once used clinically to refer to intellectual disability that is now outmoded, and all too often used as a deeply hurtful insult.

Along with her work, studies and public speaking engagements, Allen has volunteered at several charity fundraisers and camps. She will help again this summer with the I Can Bike Camp. She plans to carry her love of teaching and children forward into a career as a daycare or preschool teacher’s assistant, and would love to teach children how to dance. It is clear that Allen is a lifelong learner — just as the Plachtas expect Ruby to become, and just as any parent hopes for their child.

Ruby’s Rainbow is primed for exponential growth in coming years, as educational opportunities increase throughout the country for individuals with Down syndrome. Currently, there are over 200 college and university programs in the U.S. for people with intellectual disabilities. As that number continues to grow, the Plachtas and their Ruby’s Rainbow team know it will require continuing hard work and dedication to keep pace with the increasing need for scholarship funds.

This is work the Plachtas are more than willing to embrace. People with Down syndrome have historically been underestimated in their potential to learn, achieve and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Fortunately, this is now changing, with people like Ruby Plachta, her parents, and the Ruby’s Rainbow scholarship recipients at the forefront of reshaping public perception of people who are “rockin’ that extra chromosome.”

Visit www.rubysrainbow.org for more information about Ruby’s Rainbow.

*Catherine A. Morris, a writer living in Austin, Texas, has a toddler-aged daughter who is rockin’ an extra chromosome.*