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Local News

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New Baltimore resident honored for her work with Muscular Dystrophy

Shawn Hass' energy creates better world for MD patients

By Jeri Packer
Voice Staff Writer

There's resourceful and then there's downright determined. That would be New Baltimore resident Shawn Hass.

Hass, 40, was diagnosed with a disease now called limb-girdle muscular dystrophy at 4-years-old.

An outgoing, upbeat child with a lot of family support, she was named a Muscular Dystrophy Association poster child at age 12.

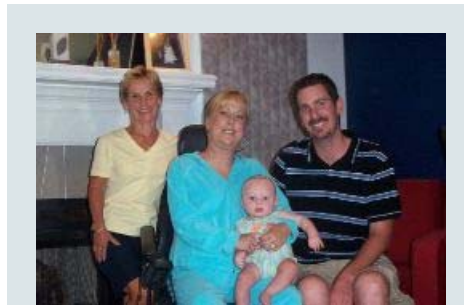
Her mom, Dolores Hallberg, likes to think some of Hass' spunk comes from her upbringing, but she said she can't take all the credit.

"I think she's just like that," she said. "She always went to a public school and, instead of taking the elevator, she would just hop on people's shoulders to get up the stairs with everyone else. She had a lot of friends who were all eager to help her and the neighborhood kids would walk home with her."

As an MDA poster child, Hass appeared on the Jerry Lewis MDA Labor Day Telethon with fellow MDA ambassador, Christopher Rush, then 2 years old, who died last year after a 30-year battle with spinal muscular atrophy.

Today, as a business executive, organization president, wife and mother, Hass still manages to find ways to achieve her goals despite her limitations.

She is still very much on the front lines in the fight against MD. That fight has resulted in Hass being honored this year with a special MDA award - the Robert Ross Personal Achievement Award for Michigan. She will appear on the hourly local segments during the annual Jerry Lewis MDA Labor Day Telethon this weekend, speaking before a national audience on MD awareness.



Shawn Hass' mother, Dolores Hallberg, Shawn and Dave Hass, and their four-month-old son, Liam, gather for a photograph in front of their fireplace in the Hass' New Baltimore home.

Photos by JERI PACKER

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Strength of character

Hass is a full-time executive assistant at Continental Plastics, where she's worked for 21 years.

In spite of what her mother says, Hass believes she had an enormous influence on her success today.

"My mom doesn't admit it, but she is a big part of how I learned to deal with people," she said. "I walked with an unusual gait, so people would talk about me when I was out at places like the mall. My mom never let it bother her, so I didn't let it bother me either."

Also, as a child, when Hass would take a spill while walking, Hallberg fought the inclination to confine her to a wheelchair. This made it possible for her to walk on her own for 32 years before her body weakened too much to allow her to stand any longer.

"When I walked, I sometimes tired and fell, but my mom always pushed me to do it," she said. "We fought that through my childhood."

MDA Health Care Service Coordinator Denise Gant nominated Hass for the Robert Ross Achievement Award "because of her perseverance and spirit in attaining her professional goals, and for her dedication to advocacy for people with muscular dystrophy." The national award was instituted in 1992 to honor those fighting MD and other related diseases.

"She's pretty savvy with resources," Gant said. "She is such a great role model for young adults."

She has known Hass for eight years and appreciates the contribution she has made to MDA.

"MDA functions not only provide research funding, but they focus on the quality of life a person can have, helping them to be the best they can be," she said. "Every day they have to deal with the disease. It helps them recognize that no matter what's going on with their prognosis, they can still live a productive life and make a difference in the world. I see it every day."

Fighting back

Hass's form of MD is a muscle-wasting disease that starts in the shoulder and pelvic areas. Eight years ago, she began using a power-driven wheelchair to get around. That was around the same time she and fiancé, Dave, were planning their wedding.

Only, the bride wasn't about to go down the aisle in a wheelchair, and her original plan to walk with her parents wasn't working out.

"I was able to walk holding onto people, so my parents were going to walk me down the aisle," she said. "Well, just before the wedding, I was looking in a mirror at how it would look with them holding me up and I didn't like the way I looked. So, I needed to get down the aisle another way - not in a wheelchair and not holding onto someone."

That's when Hass' determined side really kicked in.

"I had an idea, so we got a wooden bar stool and Dave put casters on the bottom," she said. "I sat on it and put my wedding dress around it, so you couldn't see it. My parents held me with one arm on each side and pushed the stool with the other hand."

Dave Hass, who served as a counselor at MDA camp for many years, said his wife's willingness to adapt to situations and be flexible are some of her best characteristics.

"She won't let her disabilities stop her," he said. "She's very resourceful and isn't afraid to try things."

Several years ago, the New Baltimore couple took up a new challenge when they decided to adopt a child.

"I could've had kids, but I probably would've been too physically weak," Hass said. "We looked into adoption but ran into challenges with adoption agencies. Then we were able to find a surrogate mom."

Four months ago, Liam Michael was born, and now the couple has a new look for their living room with baby apparatuses taking up a quarter of the space.

Building strong relationships

Her "camp family" has been extremely important to Hass in building strong relationships. She began attending MDA camp when she was 7 years old and continued until the cut-off age at 21.

"They provide a lot of support, emotionally, socially," Dave Hass said. "Some of the best friends she's known since they were kids."

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The camp provides an opportunity for participants to experience activities they wouldn't normally be able to do, like horseback riding, playing baseball, and attending an annual dance. Each camper has a camp partner to help them through the activities.

Shawn Hass, originally from Roseville, has always been able to look on the bright side, and said the camp experience really helped her to keep an optimistic viewpoint.

"There were always campers much worse than me," she said. "I would see this camper in a wheelchair, who couldn't even feed himself and I would think, 'I am so lucky. It could have been a lot worse.' That's how I've lived my whole life."

Her love of camp had a serious bearing on the direction of a big part of her life. She became involved in a group called Volunteers Assisting the Disabled many years ago, and has made it possible for adult MDA patients in Southeastern Michigan to continue to enjoy the camp experience.

"In 1998, MDA had to make cutbacks - now the cut off for MDA camp is 18 years old," she said. "A group of people decided to raise money to help people 21 and older go to camp. I saw what the group was doing and I wanted to get involved.

"I eventually became a board member, treasurer, vice president and (about) eight years ago, I became president of the organization. Basically, we pick up where MDA leaves off, under their umbrella."

She attends the camp each year at the end of July, just to relax and have fun, she said.

Sadly, Shawn has had to say goodbye to some of her closest friends, many from her earliest camp days.

"I've lost a lot of good friends through dystrophy," she said. "Billy (Defoor,) an MDA patient special to both Dave and I died in 2002. We named Liam after him."

Dave Hass works full time for a medical supply company and does much of the housework for Hass, so she can conserve her energy for other things that need her attention. He is one of Hass' greatest admirers.

"There are many people with MD that have done incredible things," he said, "but Shawn's one of those people who does things for others. That's one of the amazing things about her."

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