

## Cheer class helps developmentally disabled girls

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Once 17-year-old senior Rhiannon Martin of Windsor decided she wanted something more from cheerleading class, she took it to the next level.

“I’ve been cheering for four years,” Rhiannon said. “I always knew I wanted to coach, I just didn’t know when.”

Rhiannon and several other members of the Northern Colorado Shooting Stars, a competitive cheerleading squad, volunteer their time to coach a cheer class for developmentally disabled girls. They’re called the Northern Colorado Shining Stars.

“This is so great,” said Sharon Boyer of Windsor, program director for all the participants. “We have an amazing group of young girls who are going out of their way just for the younger girls to learn.”

Not only are the kids learning cheers and dance routines, but they also learn social and bonding skills.

“I love this program,” said parent, Nancy Merritt of Fort Collins. “I’ve met fabulous parents from this program and my daughter is able to socialize and have fun.”

Before Rhiannon started the class, 14-year-old Kylie Merritt and several other girls were enrolled in a special needs swim class through Colorado State University.

One after school activity wasn’t enough, parents said.

“There were programs available for her to hang out at in school,” Merritt said. “But there was nothing that would include her.”

Rhiannon said each of the girls are influenced by each other’s confidence and enthusiasm.

“The girls are so fun,” Rhiannon said. “They’re relaxed, they’re loud and they make me laugh.”

Once the program opened, word spread around the school and pretty soon all the girls that Boyer could think of were enrolled.

“We look forward to it every week,” said Pam Franek of Fort Collins.

Her daughter, Amanda, knows when it’s Tuesday. Amanda is so excited, she’ll be dressed and ready by 4:30 p.m. even though the class doesn’t start until 7 p.m.

After watching the girls gather on a gray tarp to take their first team photo. Franek couldn’t



Members of the Northern Colorado Shining Stars, from left, Kylie Merritt, Jamie Schatz and Anne Haley practice their cheers. The cheerleading squad for girls with developmental disabilities met Tuesday in Fort Collins.

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Photo by [Eric Bellamy](#)

help but get excited.

While Amanda's brother, Andrew, has a wall full of plaques and trophies, Amanda has been waiting 14 years to get one on her own.

"His wall's full," Franek said looking at her son. "Amanda's never had anything on her wall. This is so exciting."

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