

For this group of cheerleaders, victory comes with each hug, with each high-five

By KATHLEEN D. BAILEY
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HAMPSTEAD – Several young women hoisted Courtney Catanzaro, 6, of Hampstead into the air. She raised her arms in the traditional stance of victory. When they lowered her gently, she ran to Katy Cummings, her cheerleading coach at eXtreem Cheer in Hampstead.

"Good job," Cummings said, raising her hand for a high-five. After a moment of hesitation, Courtney delivered.

Courtney is a special-needs child. While other cheering squads are not an option because of their competitive nature, gyms like eXtreem Cheer seek to fill the gap with special-needs cheering programs. Because of that, Courtney and her parents really have something to cheer about.

Courtney and four other special-needs students meet once a week under the tutelage of Cummings and several volunteer coaches, who are all high school cheerleaders. They do a warm-up and then practice jumps, forward rolls and other stunts, all at their own pace. Some of the girls wear regular casual clothes, while Courtney likes to wear a short, flared skirt. They proceed at their own speed, with lots of hugs and affirmation.

According to Cummings, the Hampstead program is one of only two special-needs cheering programs in New Hampshire. The other is in Exeter. But the idea isn't a new one: It's a feature of many gyms across the country.

Cummings emphasized that, like the other squads at eXtreem Cheer, these girls don't go out and cheer for a team. It's competition cheering. But when the regular squads go to a competition, Courtney, Amber, Tara, Kendra and Adriana will be right beside them, cheering in their own division.

"It gives them a sense of being a part of things," said Cummings, who also coaches cheerleaders at Pinkerton Academy.

Courtney's mother, Michelle, is always looking for things Courtney can be a part of. Courtney, who has Down syndrome, has been dancing and doing gymnastics since the age of 2. She's involved in a special-needs dance program with the Boston Ballet. And she's always loved cheerleading.

Catanzaro has seen physical and social improvement through the cheering program. It has helped Courtney with her muscle tone and memory. "Even her speech is better. She has to give out different commands, like when they play 'Simon Says,'" Catanzaro said.

Kendra Provencher's mom, Patricia Worsley, said the 18-year-old had been in a special-needs squad Cummings ran for a short time in Nashua. When the Hampstead program opened, the decision was easy.

"She has more self-esteem, she feels like she's with the other kids," Worsley said. "The high school even lets her use it for her gym credit."

The other members of the squad are Tara Taylor of Nashua, Amber Gagnon, also of Nashua, and Adriana Cavalho of Sandown. Teen volunteer coaches are Molly McEachern, Melissa Delaney, Kara Field and Danielle Pica, all Pinkerton Academy cheerleaders.

The squad is looking for sponsors for uniforms. For more information, to enroll a child or to help, call Mark Accidard or Gina Moody at eXtreem Cheer at 329-6688.

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