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EDUCATION

People magazine features 3 area girls in Hoop Dreams article

12-10-04

By Tina Firesheets, Staff Writer
 News & Record

JAMESTOWN — It wasn't news of Julia Roberts' twins that sent three area families to newsstands for the latest issue of People magazine this week.

When Karen Gunter received the phone call that her daughter, Erica, was in the December 13 issue that's on newsstands, the family rushed out to buy the magazine.

"Erica was running through Harris Teeter trying to find anybody she knew in there to show it to them. She couldn't find anybody she knew, so she showed it to the lady who checked us out," Karen Gunter said.

Erica Gunter, a 16-year-old sophomore at Ragsdale High School in Jamestown, is one of three Guilford high school students featured in a story about Hoop Dreams, a Durham-based basketball program for youths with life-threatening illnesses.


Erica Gunter received a diagnosis of brain cancer at age 9. She is cancer-free, but still goes to Duke Medical Center for regular checkups.

Also featured in the article are Dana Smith, a junior at Southeast Guilford High School, and Emma Peeples, a senior at Grimsley High School in Greensboro. Like Erica, Smith and Peeples had brain cancer diagnosed in elementary school and still go to Durham for checkups.



Emma Peeples, 17, (from left) Dana Smith, 16, and Erica Gunter, 16, demonstrate new basketball skills. (Nelson Kepley/@News & Record)

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Smith received the diagnosis in 1996 and Peeples in 1995. Smith is cancer-free, but Peeples, whose cancer was inoperable, still has some of the tumor in her brain. Her tumor shrank with chemotherapy treatments and has been stable for 10 years.

suggestions about the News-Record.com.

They go to Durham every Saturday to learn basketball skills and tricks that help strengthen their muscles and improve their coordination and balance. They have learned to dribble two basketballs at once, as well as twirl the ball on their fingertips and perform basic layups.

The program trains participants in this way, rather than preparing them for a competitive game.

This is because the side effects from radiation and chemotherapy treatments often limit their physical abilities, even years after cancer.

"It's a modified version of regular sports," Erica Gunter said.

She and her Hoop Dreams teammates tire easily and are unable to perform as well as their peers in physical education classes. Gunter, who took dance lessons before her cancer diagnosis, has trouble with her balance. Sometimes she was mocked or teased during PE class.

Smith, once the fastest female runner in her class, wants to try out for her school's cross country team next year. Still, it frustrates her that she can't run as fast as her classmates.

Peeples, who once played basketball with her twin brother, is the best dribbler and shooter of the three. But she also was born with a congenital heart defect and is unable to play basketball competitively anymore because of medications to treat that illness.

Hoop Dreams allows them to participate in sports with others of similar capabilities. Their coach, Mike Zeillmann, accepts their limitations, they said.

"He's understanding even though he's never had cancer," Erica Gunter said.

Zeillman has been a basketball coach for 13 years and also works with the Duke University women's basketball team.

Want to know more?

Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy is a Durham-based nonprofit organization that provides basketball instruction to youths with serious or chronic health conditions. Participants meet at Duke University.

A \$3 million capital campaign to build a facility is under way. Once built, the academy will be available to youths and their families nationwide for support groups and free basketball camps.

Information: (919) 479-6069 or www.hoop-dreams.net

Send donation to: Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, P.O. Box 880 Hillsborough, NC 27278

In addition to improving the physical abilities of Hoop Dreams athletes, his main focus is building their self-esteem.

"Most of the kids are really scared and nervous (in the beginning). We don't care if they do it perfect," he said. "We let them have fun and socialize with each other. Most of these kids have been through so much, we just want them to feel good."

Smith said she does have more hope and self-confidence. "I always wanted to do something (physical), but I wasn't sure what I could do."

Gunter and Peoples like to see the looks of shock they get when they perform tricks.

"I just don't feel like I'm weak anymore. I feel strong," Gunter said.

Plus, she said, it also impresses people when she tells them she plays basketball at Cameron Indoor Stadium -- the same stomping ground as the powerhouse Duke Blue Devils basketball teams.

Contact Tina Firesheets at 883-4422, Ext. 245, or tfiresheets@news-record.com



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