



IN SYNC

Celebrating the Small Stuff

By Jeff Tiessen

A teen athlete. Teaches kids to swim at the community pool as a summer job. Plays the violin. Loves drama studies. Learning to drive and dreaming about owning her very own yellow “Daisy Duke” Jeep one day. Ask Nicole Flynn and she’ll tell you... she’s just a regular kid.

Nicole is a petite 17-and-a-half-year-old who describes herself as responsible, independent, competitive, fun-loving and a good friend. Like lots of teens she is taking her driving courses and practicing quite seriously. That is of course when she’s not working at the community pool as an assistant swimming lesson instructor with the little ones, or training in the pool for serious synchronized swimming competitions.

Special Olympics baseball asks of some of her time too, and so does preparing for her violin exams, and studying vocal, drama and visual arts classes through the DramaWay program. What’s that leave time for? More training in the pool... 17 hours a week with just one of her teams. She’s on two.

“A go getter,” summarizes Nicole’s mom Kathy about a daughter who arguably has worked harder than most for her achievements. The same could be said about Kathy when cataloging Nicole’s triumphs. “Confident,” adds the proud mom. “She sets goals, sets her bar high, and has the drive to achieve them. We just have to help her figure out how she can accomplish them.”

Nicole has always been an adept swimmer and took up synchronized swimming at age eight. But her entry into the sport wasn’t as fluid and graceful as the sport itself. “Nicole had hundreds of melt downs at first,” remembers Kathy. “But we kept bringing her back.” Despite her developmental disability, Kathy and husband Duane knew Nicole could learn the sport. “We weren’t going to give in,” Kathy explains. “We just needed to find the tools. It was the same way that we have taught Nicole in life. Learn to

read one word, then two sentences, four sentences, then next week maybe six sentences. Same for math tables. Small attainable goals. Keeping it positive. Keep going. Celebrate each one.”

And as expected, Nicole’s synchronized swimming kept improving. She’d watch, observe other kids, and then learn it herself. “With each accomplishment, like a back summersault or a porpoise, I’d bring a cake to practice and we’d all celebrate,” shares Kathy.

Synchronized swimming is dancing to music in water... sometimes above water, sometimes underneath. Not only did Nicole need to learn her coaches’ cues and memorize routines, her muscles required a lot of training as well. “She had to learn which muscles were which, and what it meant to ‘tighten your bum muscles,’” explains Kathy. “My husband and I were always there in the beginning to help the coaches with transitions to new skills and to help Nicole learn.”

Now a seasoned synchro swimmer of 10 years, it took Nicole over half of those years to learn how to move from one routine to another, something that she found very difficult. She had to learn how to take corrections and what to do with that information in order to improve. She had to push her memory to learn all of the routines without the help of her coach or parents. Her parents point to Nicole’s determined personality as her greatest asset in rising to those challenges.

But Nicole’s mom admits that the biggest trial comes when she doesn’t have a challenge for her daughter, something she’s labeled “the Mom’s Challenge.” Kathy can quickly sense when Nicole begins to become bored which means it’s time to figure out the stepping stones to take her to the next level. She acknowledges that Nicole’s coaches are very good at recognizing when she’s ready to move to the next level, and a new set of realistic goals are broken down into little steps.

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Nicole's string of small steps stretch through the water like an archipelago of synchro successes. She began swimming in a program for athletes with a disability (AWD) where she performs a solo routine as well as a duet with a young woman who has cerebral palsy. With over 40 gold medals in regional, provincial and national competitions under her cap, the duet qualified for the Ontario-Quebec Cup, Nicole's first mainstream event. This past spring Nicole travelled with a synchro team to Dusseldorf, Germany, without her parents, to demonstrate her solo for 172 athletes and their coaches. She was presented with a trophy recognizing her "special performance" by the German mayor.

Perhaps her biggest step however has been the splash she's made in an integrated program with a 'regular' team. She trains on land the same way they do, same hours and same performance expectations. In the pool she performs the solo she learned in her AWD program as well as a duet, this year with a young woman who is deaf. Nicole says there will be no more AWD synchro swimming for her. "I'm not disabled," she asserts. "I'm a responsible kid."

Diving into the integrated program didn't come without fears and anxiety for Nicole and her parents however. Her pool deck support is now gone. She can't look for cues from her coach and must completely commit her routine to memory, an onerous task for anyone with her disability. Unlike in AWD competitions, if she forgets what's next in her routine, her coach can not signal her from the side... her hands are behind her back.

The end result?... more cause for celebration. Nicole has had to learn about anxiety and stress before a competition and how to deal with it. "She's come to expand

her understanding of herself and improve her ability to handle new things," Kathy applauds.

But one major frustration remains. "It's still a struggle for her to be taken seriously as an athlete, despite her hard work and achievements," laments her mom. "People assume she is puttering around in the pool when in actuality she's training on an equal level with girls who are on our provincial teams."

Not to be discouraged, Kathy still encourages other parents of kids with special needs, developmental delays specifically, to pursue competitive sports opportunities. "I know parents are reluctant because of the demands. I was very anxious about the competition side of sport at first too," she confesses. "I would cry. I couldn't watch. I was worried about the pressure. But now, I'm tougher too. I see other parents not being able to watch, exactly where I was in those early days." She comforts in the fact that those fears are normal. "In fact," she offers, "moms of 'normally developing girls' have the same concerns... Is it too many hours? Are the demands and expectations too high?"

Kathy maintains that it's not wrong to put kids with unique challenges into competition, but cautions that the demands need to be appropriate. "Competing in sport will help them in life. I've seen it... one thing is for sure, it teaches them how to take feedback positively and learn from it."

And so, the Flynns celebrate the small stuff, appreciating the abilities of each of their three children – Nicole has two brothers – and the qualities that make each of them who they are today. They tackle each challenge one small step at a time. Next up? One never knows but with a budding new driver in the family, the hunt may be on for a yellow "Daisy Duke" Jeep.



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