

Sibling tops Webster youth's priority list

By Pamela M. Close
Freelance writer

WEBSTER — Melissa DiBella is a firm believer that people's actions speak louder than words.

"I think everyone deserves a chance," said DiBella, a soft-spoken yet radiant senior at Webster High School.

And no one knows this better than her 6 1/2 year old sister, Sarah. Melissa, 18, has continually cared for her youngest sister who was born prematurely and was later diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Melissa does everything from feeding and bathing Sarah to playing and talking with her because she wants her sister "to have a chance at life."

Toni DiBella, Melissa's mother, credits her eldest daughter's love and attention for Sarah's progress.

"Sarah is a happy girl, and the connection with Melissa is obvious," said Toni DiBella.

A special example of this bond is often told by family and friends. Just days after Sarah was born, she had to have eye surgery on top of other ongoing tests and procedures. Without hesitation, Melissa, then age 11, postponed a long-awaited trip to Girl Scout camp because she was worried about her sister.

"She didn't leave until we knew that Sarah would be OK," said Toni DiBella. She added that even then the family exchanged letters while Melissa attended camp, keeping her apprised of Sarah's condition.

Then at about six months of age, Sarah was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a condition caused by brain damage around the time of birth. The condition causes a variable degree of non-progressive physical and mental handicaps.

While cerebral palsy is not life-threatening to Sarah, she has little muscle control and no formal speech. She also needs help with all her daily activities.

Although some people might think of a handicapped person as a hardship to a family, Melissa describes Sarah as "the missing link" for the DiBellas, comprising Toni and her husband, Frank; Jennifer, 15; Christopher, 11; as well as Melissa and Sarah. The DiBellas are parishioners of St. Rita's Church, 1008 Maple Drive.

"We were a close family before Sarah was born. But like every other family, we had our moments," said Melissa.



Melissa DiBella cradles her little sister Sarah on the deck of their family's home in Webster. Melissa shares a special bond with her youngest sibling, who has cerebral palsy.

"Then came Sarah. She has brought us closer. We know what's important now."

Toni DiBella pointed out that much of Melissa's efforts occur behind the scenes.

"Whenever someone asks me to describe Melissa, I can't give them a list of clubs and school activities that she's been involved with," Toni DiBella said. "In God's divine plan, she's the person who's been there to watch Sarah when I picked up Jen from cheerleading practice, or when Chris was playing soccer, or when Dad was away at work. Melissa is definitely our special little angel."

"I like helping my family," Melissa responded. "And if they're happy because they can do things while I'm watching Sarah, then all the power to

them."

Melissa acknowledged that it is not always easy taking care of Sarah.

"Sure, sometimes I do get frustrated — especially if I'm stressed out from school. But when I do snap and scare her with my voice, I don't treat her like a baby when she cries and just try to make her stop," she said. "I talk to her normally and say I'm sorry. She understands. I treat her like I want to be treated. She deserves that."

This policy goes for Melissa's classmates as well.

"I'm a people person. I like being friends with everyone at school," she said. "Sure, there are a lot of cliques at Webster High but I'm not someone who sticks to one group. I give everyone a chance."

In addition to enjoying spending time with people, Melissa works at a local Wegmans food market more than 20 hours a week. She is also involved with her school's vocational child-care program, already completing four field placements at area day-care centers.

"I love working with little children," she said. "I want to teach them to be the best they can be, to care for each other, and to get the most out of life. It's the only way to live."

Melissa seems to leave no one out in her belief that everyone deserves a chance — not even herself.

Recently diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, Melissa fights to constantly stay focused on the task at hand. "Making lists has made it easier," she said.

The hard work has paid off as Melissa prepares to graduate. She plans to attend Monroe Community College in the fall to study elementary education. After college, Melissa said that she sees herself getting more involved in the community by working with children.

She also sees herself with Sarah.

"I've always said that when my parents can't take care of Sarah anymore, she will come and live with me. I know that might not be practical, but there's no reason why it can't happen," she said.

"Besides, Sarah and I — we're alike," Melissa added. "If she was in my place and I was in hers, I know she'd do the same for me or for anyone else. I know she'd give someone a chance."

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Pope says CUA helps enrich social life in the U.S.

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II said The Catholic University of America, by promoting the Gospel message, helps enrich the country's social life.

The pope made the remarks May 27 to the university's board of trustees, meeting in

Rome. He told the group that their support of the Washington university makes a significant contribution to the future of the church and society.

"You are aware of the great need in modern society for a new evangelization; you know of the profound benefits that

the Gospel message can bring when it truly permeates and informs patterns of behavior," he said.

He said Catholic education and the academic community in particular offer "unique possibilities" for fulfilling the church's mission.

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