

Writing helps energize fatigue victim

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

LIVONIA — The suspicion had dogged her most of her high-school life.

Few of her peers could understand how Leah Shearer could tire so easily. Some, even, would question if she was really as tired as she appeared.

"That's what's really hurtful — a lot of people say it's in your head," she said. "It's just a lot of judgment people seem to pass without really knowing me."

Leah is a victim of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, more commonly known as CFS. Three years ago, at the age of 14, her life was suddenly interrupted by severe and frequent attacks of fatigue.

"It's the kind of tired where you don't know if you'll be able to take another step," Leah said.

Some accompanying symptoms included short-term memory loss, stuttering, muscle aches and headaches. She missed several days of school and was forced to cease her many after-school activities.

The fact that doctors couldn't quickly identify her condition, she said, added further to her dilemma. After she was finally diagnosed with CFS, she spent a few months in a wheelchair — a time when she "hit rock bottom," she said.

The syndrome, which can strike people of all ages, has no known cure. Although not a life-threatening disease, its effects can lead to depression and sometimes to suicidal behavior.

On the other hand, Leah's mother, Sally, said, "Some get over it completely. But you never know."

As Leah begins her senior year at Livonia Central High School, she appears to be making progress against her ailment.

"If I get over-stressed, sometimes I go right down. But so far this year, it's not been bad," she said.

Spiritually, Leah is stronger than ever. She has become affiliated with the New Jersey-based Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Youth Organization, and eagerly corresponds by mail with several youths who face the same challenges she does.

Developing this new set of friends gave her the inspiration to start up a newsletter featuring poems and other creative writings by youths with CFS.

"My pen-pals were sending in poems. One day I started typing on my computer, and kept going and going," she said.

Titled *The Mirror*, this newsletter was begun last November and is compiled by Leah quarterly. She mails the newsletter to CFS victims as far away as Australia.

"It helped me a lot. Before, I didn't



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Leah Shearer, who is battling the effects of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, is in her senior year at Livonia Central High School and a member of the youth group at St. Joseph/St. William cluster in Livonia and Conesus. She is planning to pursue writing or journalism in college next year.

think I was in control of anything. Now I'm helping people, and that feels like an accomplishment," she said. She added that she hopes to continue her writing ventures next year in college by pursuing a career in creative writing or journalism.

One of her own pieces which appeared in *The Mirror* last year was a letter addressed to anyone who does not believe in CFS. In it, she stated, "I am not a hypochondriac nor a social phobic ... I am one of many. Sometimes the only way you really will start to believe is when you or someone you know is stricken with it. I pray that you will believe before someone else must suffer."

Another inspiration for Leah is her youth-group activity in the St. Joseph/St. William cluster in Livonia and Conesus.

"They don't look at you so much as 'What's your IQ?' and 'What's your standing in school?' They look deep within the person," she acknowledged.

Support from Leah's parish was never more evident than last spring, when she was chosen by the youth group to crown the statue of Mary at the parish's annual May Family Mass. Though her energy had been sapped from attending her junior prom the night before, Leah made it through the 9:30 Mass with no problem.

One more source of ongoing strength, Leah said, has been her faith in God.

"I realized sometimes God has things happen for a reason, so you can develop a greater understanding of things — so you can help other people instead of turning toward yourself," she said.

Extra Credit

Joan Blinn, a junior at Bishop Kearney, recently earned first place in a Catholic Daughters of America sponsored poetry contest.

Joan's poem was titled "Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Leaders."

John Miller, a junior at Aquinas Institute, has received recognition for a variety of accomplishments.

John has been named an All-American Scholar by the United State Achievement Academy. The USAA has also selected him as a national award winner in science. In addition, John, a basketball and baseball athlete has been featured in *Who's Who in Sports*.

Four 1995 graduates of Geneva DeSales were named AP Scholars by the College Board for their achievements in the college-level Advanced Placement examinations.

Stephanie Neapass, a freshman at Dartmouth College, was named an AP Scholar with Distinction. Other AP Scholars from DeSales included Dan Fernandez, who attends Binghamton University; Stephen Mahoney, a freshman at the State University of New York College at Geneseo; and Sarah Scheffler, a freshman at Syracuse University.

Tim O'Herron, a recent graduate of Elmira Notre Dame, was also named an AP Scholar.

Tim is in his freshman year at Nazareth College of Rochester.

Three students from Aquinas received the top prizes in a Holocaust essay contest last spring at Monroe Community College.

Maria Furnari took first place and fellow AQ students Bridget Zakielarz and Theresa Nenni placed second and third, respectively.

Three Aquinas students spent part of the summer in Europe.

Ryan Barclay and Steve Knahner, now seniors at AQ, served as goodwill ambassadors with the Spirit of America National Honor Band tour. In addition, AQ sophomore Sean Meyer spent three weeks with the People to People Student Ambassadors Program.

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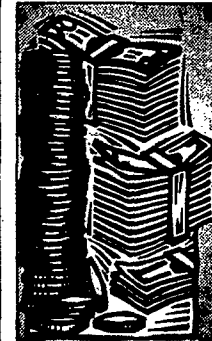


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