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Online School Opens Doors for Special Girl, Sydney

Sydney Craven was supposed to die at two years of age, the doctors said. Instead, she just turned 13, and she is now reading classic literature, learning some Latin, and studying the history of ancient Greece.



In many respects, Sydney is just like other girls her age. She loves her pets, her family, chatting with her girlfriends, computer games, and more. For her 13th birthday, the family went bowling, where Sydney played from her wheelchair and did quite well. She also finally got a present that she has been dreaming about for years: two pets of her very own, little guinea pigs she named Jellybean and Lollypop. "I love holding them," Sydney tells *The New American* magazine. "I have a camera under my bed to watch them." Her mom, Dana, says the fuzzy critters are Sydney's "little friends." "She tries to care for them and hold them," Dana explains.

In other respects, Sydney is quite different from other girls her age. For one, Sydney spends most of her day lying down in bed. Because of a genetic disorder known as spinal muscular atrophy, or SMA, her system of movement has all but disappeared. Basically, Sydney lacks a key protein, ultimately resulting in the death of crucial nerve cells in her spinal cord. By the time she was one year old, she could no longer swallow. There is no known cure as of yet, but the family still hopes that one day that will change, pointing to promising therapies currently in development. Today, Sydney even needs a machine to help her breathe. Her family, and her mom, Dana, in particular, help her do most everything else around the house.



Loving School

When it comes to education, though, Sydney is flourishing with the help of her sharp mind, emerging technologies, and a K-12 online school known as FreedomProject Academy, or FPA. The innovative school, which has been in operation for about five years now and is growing quickly, takes a different approach to education than do government schools, which Sydney tried once. Unlike the curriculum



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used in public schools, FPA emphasizes a classical education founded on Judeo-Christian values. Rather than trying to keep parents at bay, as the government education system often does, FPA works in partnership with parents to make sure every student is getting a top-notch education.

And unlike most children her age, thanks to FPA, Sydney loves school. "It's good," she told *The New American* in a Skype interview about school, typing out her responses with the help of her specialized computer system. Her favorite subject is English, because "I'm good at it," she says, breathing with help from a rather loud machine in the background. English homework is also the quickest to complete, she adds. Right now, her class is close to finishing the book *Princess and the Goblin*, which Sydney said she enjoyed, too. She does all of her homework on the computer, and her teachers and friends send her messages often. "FPA is good for kids like me who are disabled because they can just go to class on the computer," she says.

At FPA, where Sydney is now in her second year, the teachers and faculty love her, too. "She is a joy to have at FPA," says Debbi Drake, student development director for the school, adding that Sydney is a straight-A student. "She has a brilliant mind and is very motivated to do her schoolwork." Sydney is treated like any other student, Drake adds. But her ability to excel despite her disability "is an inspiration to us all," she says. "Sydney's perseverance in academics demonstrates it is not necessary to give in to the disability or limitation, but rather to strive, like she does, to do her best despite the situation."

Sydney's teachers, too, had nothing but praise for their hard-working student. "She is not the most vocal student, but she regularly volunteers to share her answers and thoughts," says Heather Harris, who teaches middle-school history and Latin. "She is a bright student and always does a good job on her assignments. Recently, the students were given an assignment to draw a picture of the Acropolis in Athens. Sydney's of course was drawn with a computer program, but I found myself staring at the detail she included and thinking about the process that she must have gone through to add each line and detail. I realized how much patience and perseverance she has had in her life in overcoming so many obstacles."

Family, Friends, Hope, and Computers

Sydney's mom, Dana, runs a small business from home selling SMA pediatric medical equipment — the same type of gear that has made it possible for Sydney to make it to 13 and perform almost like any other student at her online school. Sydney's dad has an 8-5 job in IT. The family lives on what they describe as a "hobby farm," complete with horses, "more chickens than we can count," dogs, cats, and more. Together, the family has been through a lot, not least the experience of dealing with Sydney's handicap. "It's been very difficult, tiring, we've had a lot of close calls, a lot of surgeries, but we're still here," Dana says. "And thankfully, just in the last year or so, there are a few promising therapies in the works. Whether we'll see them while we have her, we don't know."

Even with hope and technology, life can be tough sometimes. "Sydney is most comfortable lying down and spends most of her day doing so," Dana told *The New American*. "Her computer monitor hovers above her bed on an adjustable arm, and she uses a device called a SmartNav to control her computer with very small movements of her head. She wears a reflective sticker on her forehead and the camera (seen in photo) tracks the micro-movements of the sticker, which acts as her mouse." From her work station, Sydney completes all of her classes and her homework, plays online games with her friends,



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sets up Skype dates with other girls, and explores the world through the Web.

While most movement is impossible due to SMA, Sydney does still have some slight ability to move the fingers on her right hand. She uses an ultra-light touch switch called a Microlight switch to “click” on things, Dana explains. And through an on-screen keyboard, Sydney is able to use her computer almost as fully as anyone else.

“She is in frequent contact with family and friends via e-mail and Skype, plays games, watches movies, completes homework, and of course, logs into class each day to join her schoolmates at FPA,” Sydney’s mom says.

Schooling Despite Disability

But school was not always so accessible. Early in Sydney’s life, the family tried approaching a public school. “That was a disaster,” Dana recalls. “So we decided to homeschool.” It has been many years since then, and Dana has tried to block it out of her mind. But she still remembers some of it, she says about the family’s experience with public school, where school officials were “very cavalier” about Sydney’s medical needs. “Essentially they told me I would not be allowed inside the school,” Dana explains. “We were forced to relinquish our daughter and her very scary medical needs into the hands of people who were inexperienced. And then there is, in public school, for a disabled child, the countless reports, meetings, people that have to get involved.”

With FPA, “we had none of that,” Dana says. “They have been extremely respectful of my role as a parent, where in my experience with public school they made me feel like the adversary, the enemy. FPA has welcomed me to help in any way, and have really acknowledged that I’m a valuable partner with them.”

There are, of course, other online schools. But FPA initially caught Dana’s eye “because of the live interaction with the teachers,” she says. “For Sydney, it gives her the equivalent of driving to school, going into a classroom, and sitting there with a live teacher. But it gives us the benefit of having her home, with all her medical equipment, and without the chore of having to drive.”

The real classroom experience with a live teacher and other students all interacting in the class has had benefits for Sydney beyond just academics, too. “It’s been a social door for her — she has all kinds of new friends that she communicates with outside of class,” Dana says. “So it’s not just a great curriculum. For her, this is the ideal way to make friends and share experiences with other girls her age.”

“All the kids have been extremely friendly — they all know there’s something different about her, many have seen her on video, but they all treat her just like any other kid,” Dana says, smiling. “They set up Skype dates, sit down on camera, talk, we get to see other families and their pets. The girls talk about their animals, the games they play, schedule times to go online to their gaming sites, they play simultaneously together. Sometimes we’ll talk about homework. If she can’t figure something out, I tell her to ask her friends in class. It’s really been a great way for her to make a dozen friends. All of them have been just really, really good kids.”

But FPA is about more than the teachers and the social life, especially for Sydney and her family. “One of the things I love the most is that she can do school very independently,” Dana continues in an extended Skype interview. “I get her ready for school in the morning — she needs help with all of it —



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so I have a couple hours of prep work before she hits the classroom. By 10 she's ready to go, gets herself logged in, and she has absolute control over everything. She doesn't often speak, even though we have a mic. Last year she did do a lot of speaking and even said the pledge of allegiance."

"She is able with FPA to have a more normal experience than in a brick and mortar school — she could never raise her hand, ask questions, and so on, so it's a really nice way for her to participate in class," Dana says. She could never do those things in a traditional classroom. When a teacher calls on her, for example, Sydney just types out her answer. "It puts her on an identical playing field with the other kids — she can participate in the same way as all the other kids, which is fantastic," continues Dana.

The staff at FPA was also understanding, Dana said. "I was very pleasantly surprised when I contacted FPA," she explained. "I was worried it would be complicated, maybe they would not take her, maybe they would impose conditions. But they immediately said 'yes,' that 'we trust that you know what you're doing.'" Now, Sydney is in sixth grade and takes four classes — English, math, science, and history — with four different teachers.

A Classical Education

Another highlight of FPA for the Craven family is the school's curriculum — and the huge difference between FPA and the public-school system. "You'll have to stop me because I could probably go for an hour about this," Dana says with a big smile on her face. "Homeschooling really caused me to pay attention to education in the country in general. It became clear to me that the schools were not the schools I remembered growing up, and those were probably not the schools my parents remember. I see less and less effort to help learning, and more and more effort on indoctrination, social engineering — things I don't want my kids exposed to."

The family prefers classical education, too, and FPA provides that, Dana says. While she did not grow up in a religious family, and says she still needs to grow her own faith, she also thinks the emphasis on Judeo-Christian values and the associated worldview are very valuable. "It raises the standard of absolutely everything in the school — behavior, lesson plans, choices of reading materials," she explains. "Having the Judeo-Christian seed in everything that they do absolutely raises the quality of every aspect of the school. It's really important to have that piece there."

Even matters that seem more mundane to many parents have been important to the Craven family. For instance, government schools today rarely teach cursive, while FPA makes it mandatory. "That's very important to me," says Dana. "So many important documents and pieces of writing are in cursive, and sadly, a lot of people today can't read it. I want my kids to be able to read that. I wanted my kids to read classic literature as well. Schools today often don't do that — novels that all children should read are not in school curricula anymore. But FPA has allowed my kids to read great works. FPA also teaches Latin, and that is so valuable. Plus the emphasis on the good old basics, which I'm really an advocate of. Having a strong foundation and base will allow my kids to learn anything they want to learn in the future."

Sydney has a younger brother, Scott, who also attends FPA. And while he does not have a disability, he, too, enjoys the online school. In an interview with this magazine, Scott, who is in fourth grade, was lively, bouncy, and talkative. His mom says he had the same sort of social experience as Sydney, but with the added benefit of being able to talk easily. Apparently little Scotty — "don't put that in your



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article,” he says, smiling and snuggling up next to his sister, “my name is Scott!” — is not quite as responsible as Sydney when it comes to getting all homework assignments done.

But FPA has a great system of accountability that helps the family stay on top of everything, Dana says. “With FPA, I can log in, keep an eye on where he’s at, what needs to be done, the quality of what he’s turned in, see his teachers’ comments,” she explains. “So that’s a nice feature for parents. For parents who really want to be involved, they can do that, and for those less concerned, they can log in periodically.”

Especially in the modern era, options such as FPA are important, Dana says, adding that homeschooling has become increasingly mainstream and that, with tools such as FPA to help parents along, it is now within reach for everyone. “In this time period where schools are really going through some crazy transitions — you’ve got boys in girls’ bathrooms now, really nutty stuff — a lot of parents don’t realize that there are a lot of alternatives,” she explains. “They need to know that just because kids don’t go to brick and mortar school does not mean they can’t get a great education. Actually they can get all the good things about school without being exposed to all the things that are not so good.”

Sydney is “very happy with it,” her mom concludes. Of course, the young girl “would love to be in a healthy body where she had the same choices as others.” “That’s her real wish,” Dana says. “But those aren’t the cards she was dealt, and nothing else could have possibly filled more voids for her than FPA.”

FPA is affiliated with The John Birch Society, the parent organization of *The New American*.



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