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Perseverance is a powerful tool: Jayde Gowitzka

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Riverside's Julia Hixson, left, is congratulated by Sandusky's Jayde Gowitzka after Hixson won the 50 Yard Para Freestyle during D1 swimming finals at C.T. Branin Natatorium in Canton in 2022. John Kuntz, cleveland.com



By Guest columnist, cleveland.com

Guest columnist Jayde Gowitzka, 18, a senior at Sandusky High School, is the 2024 Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio's Youth of the Year and the reigning state champion in the girls para division 50-yard freestyle and 100-yard backstroke events. She plans to attend the University of Akron, where she will study psychology.

Life puts obstacles in front of all of us. I am no different.

My first and ongoing challenge has been growing up with a condition that affects my daily life -- cerebral palsy, a disorder that affects my ability to use and control the muscles on the right side of my body.

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Foot reconstruction surgery in the sixth grade was just one of the hurdles I had to clear. Physical therapy helped. And the encouragement of others has empowered me to embrace my condition.

I found ways to feel comfortable in my own skin.

Little did I know I would face an even bigger obstacle as a young teenager. I was assaulted by a family member.

For a full year, I blamed myself, suffering in silence and engaging in self-destructive behavior. It wasn't until a friend courageously reached out to a counselor, starting a chain of events that would ultimately put me on the path to healing and self-discovery.

Today, I am a more confident, trusting person who has learned to persevere.

One big reason is the support I receive every day from both my biological family and my second family at Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio. My time at the club has left an indelible mark on me, opening my eyes to diverse foods, cultures and friendships.

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Boredom was never on the agenda. Mentors consistently introduced us to new activities and interests, from learning to play the keyboard to delving into the intricacies of different cultural backgrounds.

Growing up in a biracial family, exposure to Black history held particular significance for me.

My experience at the club has instilled in me the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity. The people at the club believed in my abilities. Their encouragement helped me grow as a person and as a high school swimmer, where my goal was to win a state championship.

So you can imagine my reaction when, during my junior year, I discovered I was allergic to chlorine. That's right, a swimmer allergic to chlorine.

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This time I was ready for the challenge. With the help of my family and doctors, I overcame the allergy and was able to compete, winning two events at this year's state meet.

In moments of doubt or difficulty, I find solace in knowing I have a strong support system of people rallying behind me. Their love, encouragement and unwavering presence have shaped me into the resilient individual I am today. For that, I am endlessly grateful.

Readers are invited to submit Opinion page essays on topics of regional or general interest. Send your 500-word essay for consideration to Ann Norman at anorman@cleveland.com. Essays must include a brief bio and headshot of the writer. Essays rebutting today's topics are also welcome.

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