



'I don't have time to be sad'

July 01, 2009

Jake Krob

When a kid told Caitlin Mills he felt sorry for her, she didn't hesitate:

"I feel sorry for you - you have two human arms and I have one robot arm."

That's Caitlin - quick witted, funny and cheery. She just happens to have one arm.

"I don't want to be thought of as the girl with one arm, but as the swim coach or the goofy girl at Odyssey Theatre," she said.

"I don't feel sorry for myself," she added.

It's that outlook that's allowed Caitlin to deal with a change that's a relative rarity in the U.S. She lost her right arm below the shoulder as a result of a Jan. 3 rollover accident near Abbe Creek School as she and friend Masen Marshall returned to Mount Vernon from Cedar Rapids that night.

"I didn't see any reason to be sad about it," she said. "I could have lost more. I could have lost my best friend."

And then she smiles.

"I don't have time to be sad," she said, turning to 12-year-old sister Brenna. "I do have time to play Guitar Hero with my sister."

Caitlin, the daughter of Jeffrey and Phyllis, is 18 and graduated this May from Mount Vernon High School. Although positive about the experience of adjusting to life with one arm, she knows this past year has brought challenges.

After the amputation at the University of Iowa, she and her family immediately set out to find a firm to help her with a prosthetic. Caitlin met a nurse in the hospital who had previously lost his arm. Through him, followed by research on the Internet, she turned to Advanced Arm Dynamics in Waterloo.

Two months after receiving what she calls her robot arm, Caitlin's lifeguarding at the Mount Vernon pool and helped with the recent Odyssey Theatre summer production.

The options for prosthetics are numerous, Caitlin said. One was a body-powered one, where movements of the shoulders and contractions of the shoulder blades make the arm move. She went with one that's fully electric.

She explains the process simply: Experts took measures of what she calls her "nub," made a plaster casting to be able to make a socket, attached a lifelike forearm and hand and she has a functional arm.

But, she says, it was "exhausting" to prepare for its use.

She trained for a week in Waterloo to learn how to flex her shoulder muscles in various ways that set off two sensors on the arm and make the arm and hand move. She's quick to show that the training paid off - demonstrating how she can turn her new wrist 360 degrees.

Caitlin said prior to the training she worked with Iowa Physical Therapy in Mount Vernon on biofeedback "to tell when and how I was flexing." That, she said, was a big help later on.

She charges the arm daily, and points out that other attachments can be hooked up to it, including knives, whisks, golf clubs and a fishing pole.

She can't get it wet, so she doesn't wear it when she's lifeguarding at the pool or helping with the swim team as a coach. And there are other times, she said, when she decides to relax with friends without it.

Caitlin is a member of the American Amputee Coalition, an advocacy group. But mostly, she educates informally whenever anyone has a question.

And she does it with humor when people asked what happened. She says it was taken by an "Iowa corn shark" or that she didn't follow the rules of "keeping your hands and arms inside" on the Mixer carnival ride. Sometimes, she says she was a magician's assistant, "and he was not a very good magician."

The outlook, she said, is from her family.

"We just like making jokes ... with a lot of sarcasm," she said.

This fall, Caitlin will begin college at Coe in Cedar Rapids. She's bought a netbook, a laptop with a small keyboard that allows her to type with one hand. She's still working on writing as a lefty after losing her dominant hand.

She's jazzed about college, pointing out that Coe has been supportive since the accident. Officials at the residential college said Caitlin could even live at home for the first semester if that suited her better.

That's not an option for her.

"I'm so ready for college - I'm excited," she said.

There's only one small worry.

"I hope my roommate can deal with my odd sense of humor," she said.