



Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times

Shreveport middle schooler Camille Tharpe refused to let scoliosis become a stigma for her. She shares her story with classmates and has started a support group for other teen and tween girls with scoliosis. At the same time, she stays active, playing tennis and swimming.

Curvy Girls

Shreveport teenager starts support group for scoliosis patients

By Melody Brumble

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Camille Tharpe wants to help other girls realize scoliosis doesn't equal social stigma.

An eighth-grader at Cad-do Middle Magnet School in Shreveport, Camille already is coping with teen social pressures. When she learned earlier this year that she would have to wear a brace to correct a curve in her back, she broke down. About 10 percent of children and teens have scoliosis, which can cause C- or S-shaped curves in the spine if untreated.

"I was terrified. I was crying. Really, the only thing I wanted at that point was a friend who understood," Camille,

13, said.

Camille turned to Curvy Girls, a national support group started by a New York state teen with scoliosis. Members of Curvy Girls provided the help Camille sought. Camille even talked to founder Leah Stoltz briefly.

"The day Camille got the brace, she was having a very hard time. As your daughter struggles, you struggle," said Christine Tharpe, her mom. "She called a couple of girls in the support group, and after she talked to them, I could see a change in her. She felt better that night."

The advice and kindness prompted Camille to start a Louisiana chapter of Curvy Girls. The group will hold its first meeting this fall in Shreveport. In the meantime, Camille is sharing her experience to encourage other tween and teen girls to join the group. She's gained the support of staff at Shriners Hospital in Shreveport. She started going to Shriners as a fourth-grader so doctors could keep an eye on



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Shreveport teen Camille Tharpe was diagnosed with the back curvature at age 10 and now must wear a back brace 23 hours a day while going through an adolescent growth spurt.

Go online

SHREVEPORTTIMES.COM to read more about the Curvy Girls support group.

the scoliosis. Up to 500 scoliosis patients visit the hospital each year.

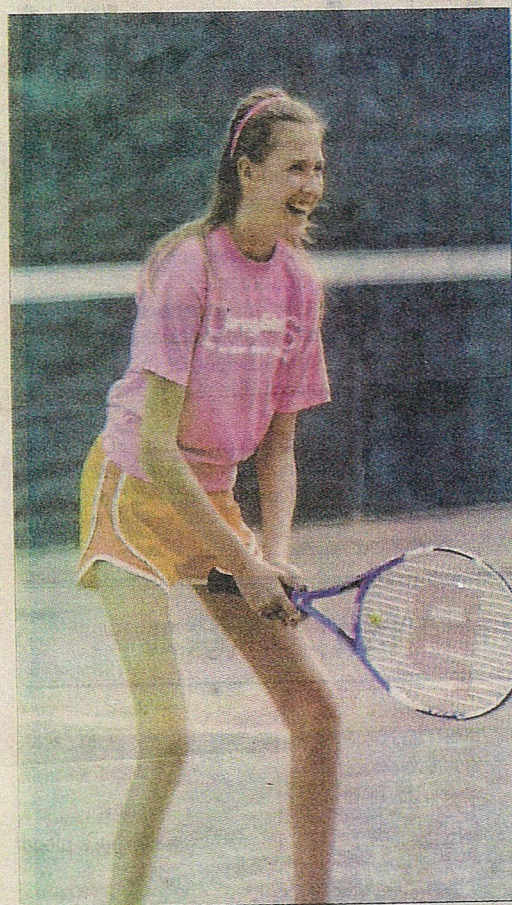


McCall

"The most common time for scoliosis is adolescence, and that probably is the worst time for kids," said Dr. Richard McCall, who sees Camille and other scoliosis patients. "Probably the biggest problem for the kids with braces is appearance. At that age, everybody wants to be accepted. You have a lot of self-image problems."

Getting young patients to wear a brace 23 hours a day for months, even a year, can be a struggle. The plastic braces

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Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times

Shreveport middle schooler Camille Tharpe enjoys a game of tennis with a friend. Tharpe keeps active daily, proving that scoliosis won't get her down.

Girls

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cover a person from shoulders to hips and are uncomfortable.

"Even though we see a lot of patients with scoliosis, each patient feels like they're the only one," McCall said.

Camille said she felt that way until talking to Curvy Girls members. She also discovered that some classmates have scoliosis, and some even underwent surgery to correct the curvature.

She's also adjusting to the brace, although she worries that the discomfort will distract her in class.

"It's part of my body now. It's an exoskeleton," Camille said, laughing.

Jennifer Love, a physician's assistant at Shriners Hospital, applauds Camille's effort to start a support group.

"She's done this from the ground up. She did

About Curvy Girls

Founded by Leah Stoltz, of Long Island, New York, in 2006.

22 U.S. chapters and one Canadian group.

Open to pre-teen and teen girls with scoliosis.

Call Camille and Christine Tharpe at (318) 210-7485 or email them at curvygirlslouisiana@gmail.com for more information about the Louisiana chapter.



Love

all the research, made all the flyers. For a 13-year-old, that's pretty impressive. I

would love for them to expand it to the smaller communities around us," Love said. "I would love for her to be a source of ease for the other girls."

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