

Lackey student talks scoliosis group at Indian Head meeting

By CHARLIE WRIGHT cwright@somdnews.com 10 hrs ago

The Indian Head Town Meeting on Monday consisted of the usual reports from various government committees and local organizations, but a Lackey High School student broke up the relative monotony with an informational presentation about Curvy Girls Scoliosis.

Melanie Watkins took the podium during the "Briefings" portion of the evening and discussed her struggles with the disease as well as the solace she's found with the local support group. She was diagnosed in fifth grade and within a month began wearing a plastic brace 23 hours a day. Now a junior at Lackey High School, Watkins is the leader of the Southern Maryland Chapter of Curvy Girls Scoliosis and shared her story to increase visibility and participation for the organization.

"Scoliosis does not have a pattern, so each diagnosis is different and each brace, like each girl, is different," Watkins said. "That's what makes Curvy Girls Scoliosis so important, whether they are newly diagnosed or they are already braced, each chapter provides a place for young girls to get the emotional support that is so important."

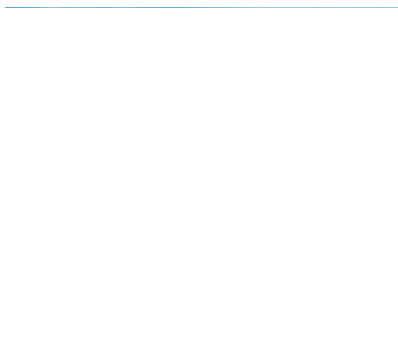
The group was started in 2006 by Leah Stoltz, a Long Island native looking to talk about her struggles outside of adult scoliosis meetings with patients her own age. Her idea for a children-only gathering has expanded into an international nonprofit, with 72 chapters in the United States and 22 in foreign countries. Girls ages six to 18 are encouraged to join their nearby chapter for monthly meetings and fun activities.

Watkins said at her group, the parents and kids separate into two groups so the adults can discuss doctors and medical information while the girls talk about finding clothes that fit and sitting in uncomfortable school desks. The Port Tobacco native has an S-type curve in her spine and underwent a spinal fusion at Johns Hopkins Hospital a few years back. Watkins has two chrome rods and 25 screws in her body from shoulder to hip, but is still very mobile despite some flexibility limitations.

"While I'm limited physically to some things, I am very active and I don't really let it get in the way," Watkins said. "Unless I go through metal detectors in a foreign country, then it's just bells and whistles and security guards everywhere."

Councilman Curtis Smith met Watkins at a recent health fair in Charles County, and the pair talked about the Curvy Girls program. When Smith brought up the idea of inviting her to this month's town meeting, the Town Council and staff eagerly agreed.

"Spinal surgery isn't something that's easy whatsoever, so having that emotional support is definitely needed," said Mayor Brandon Paulin. "Getting the word out there that there are programs like this for girls in Southern Maryland to be able to get that emotional support is very good."



Watkins plans to become a professional photographer, and the council has mentioned using her services at town events. She will be appearing at other Indian Head functions to talk about Curvy Girls and share its motto.

"At Curvy Girls we like to say that we are bent, not broken, because we can still do lots of things," Watkins said. "We just have to learn new ways of doing them."

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