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Facing her challenges head

Inspired by dance, founder of Curvey Girls continues to help others with

By LISA MANCUSO

hen Leah Stoltz was 11, she was diagnosed with scoliosis. Although she had to wear a full torso, hard plastic brace for 22 hours a day, for 2 1/2 years, she didn't let that hold her down. At 13, to help other girls who were going through what she was dealing with, Leah founded a support group called Curvy Girls of Long Island.

a support group called Curvy Girls of Long Island. Since then, the foundation has grown to include support groups all across the country.

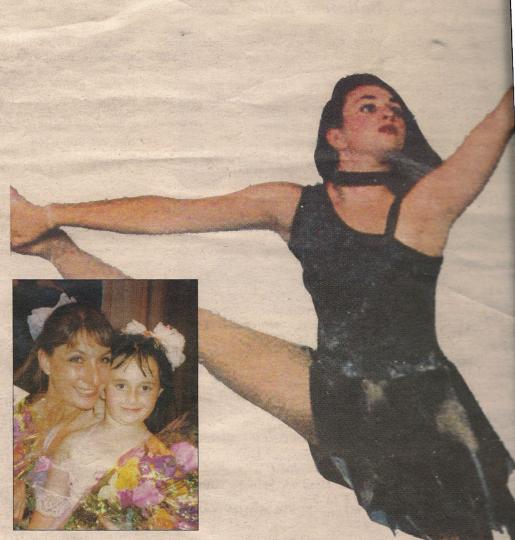
Last year, while a senior at Smithtown High School West, Leah won a TeenNick HALO (Helping And Aiding Others) Award, a program that recognizes deserving roung people and the important work they are doing o give back to others. Now starting her freshman rear at American University in Washington, D.C., eah will continue her work with Curvy Girls and he National Scoliosis Foundation, for which she is a pokesperson. And she will continue one more thing hat has always been important to her: dance.

Leah has always loved to dance, said her mother tobin Stoltz. "She always seemed to measure verything by dance," she said. "She would say, 'As ing as I can dance, I'll be okay." Dance, said Mrs. toltz, a clinical social worker for nearly 30 years, as a way for Leah to express herself, a way to sercise and meet other girls. Although she had to ve up being on the kick line in school while she ore her brace, Leah was still able to stay involved ith dance, thanks to her teacher Ann Mercedes anch of the Corner Dance Studio in Smithtown.

"Ann did a wonderful thing. She visited Leah while ie was recuperating from her surgery and she ked if she would like to work at the front desk," id Mrs. Stoltz. "It was such a wonderful, sensitive ing to do. Ann always encourages everybody, kids th any kind of disability. It's about self-esteem, t necessarily competitiveness. She gives them place to belong. And that's what Curvy Girls is out, too."

When Leah was first diagnosed with scoliosis, she as if her world was coming apart, said her mom, t by reaching out to help others through her rvy Girls and having the continued opportunity lance, Leah was able to face her challenges head

Mrs. Stoltz said Leah's final recital after 15 rs of dancing was breathtaking, and her mom 1 it was clear that Leah was able to use dance work through her struggles. Leah and her mom 1 ld like to help bring dance to another child who truggling in some way. "They can email us and us why dance is important to them. We would to give back and pay someone's tuition," said . Stoltz. She ask that letters be emailed to her at



rsues@msn.com

Mrs. Stoltz said that Curvy Girls is now "taking on a life of its own" and the foundation has nearly tripled in size. Leah and her group participated in the National Scoliosis Foundation's annual walk at Jones Beach, where, she said, one of the Curvy Girls bravely wore her brace on top of her clothes. "It showed how they are not ashamed of their scoliosis. After the HALO Awards, it's almost cool to wear the brace. They are not ashamed about it anymore."

For more information about Curvy Girls, visit http://groups.google.com/group/curvygirls. Leah and her mom, along with other mothers and daughters from Curvy Girls of Long Island have just completed a book titled Straight Talk with the Curvy Girls, and hope to find a publisher soon. Beginning August 26 through September 26, TeenNick will be airing an update on Leah Stoltz and her work with Curvy Girls.

Leah Stoltz, a 2010 Smithtown High School West graduate and found of the organization Curvy Girls wh has grown to include support gro all the across the country for girls Ms. Stoltz was inspired by dama age by her dance teacher Ann M