

Facing her challenges head

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

By LISA MANCUSO

When 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. 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 young people and the important work they are doing to give back to others. Now starting her freshman year at American University in Washington, D.C., Leah will continue her work with Curvy Girls and the National Scoliosis Foundation, for which she is a spokesperson. And she will continue one more thing that has always been important to her: dance.

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

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

When Leah was first diagnosed with scoliosis, she felt as if her world was coming apart, said her mom, but by reaching out to help others through her Curvy Girls and having the continued opportunity to dance, Leah was able to face her challenges head on.

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



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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 founder of the organization Curvy Girls which has grown to include support groups all the across the country for girls. Ms. Stoltz was inspired by dance age by her dance teacher Ann Me

