

Dimensions of *Living*

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Teen angel earns HALO

HS senior turns hardship into opportunity, on TeenNick awards show this Friday for work with scoliosis support group

By LISA MANCUSO

At the age of 11, Leah Stoltz, now a senior at Smithtown High School West, was told she was developing a serious lateral curve in her spine and was diagnosed with scoliosis. She was immediately placed in a full torso, hard plastic brace, which she had to wear for 22 hours a day, for 2 ½ years. Leah was devastated. Middle School and the changes adolescence bring are hard enough for young girls to deal with; with scoliosis, she felt alone and very different from her friends.

But instead of feeling sorry for herself, Leah decided she had to do something for other girls who were going through the same things. So, at 13, she started a support group called Curvy Girls of Long Island. "We meet once a month. There are girls from all over Long Island," said Leah. "We talk about everything. About our doctors, the problem with our clothes fitting, gym class. Just the normal everyday problems that most kids have, but that are even harder when you have scoliosis."

Leah has since become a spokesperson for the National Scoliosis Foundation. Through Curvy Girls, she has been able to help educate and support other girls and their families about living with scoliosis. She is obviously making a difference in a lot of young girls' lives and her efforts have not gone unnoticed. This past September, Leah was surprised at her high school by a visit from celebrity Nick Cannon, who founded the TeenNick HALO (Helping And Aiding Others) Awards, a program that recognizes deserving young people and the important work they are doing to give back to others and matching them with celebrities who are involved in philanthropic causes.

At a school pep rally on September 25, Mr. Cannon presented Leah with the HALO Award, along with a \$10,000

scholarship and a \$10,000 check for the Curvy Girls foundation. As if that wasn't enough, Leah also received a week-long trip to Las Vegas this October, where she attended a golf camp with singer Justin Timberlake, who called Leah "his hero." (Leah is on her school's golf team.) "It was surreal being there with Justin Timberlake. It was a lot of fun and so cool," she said. Leah learned the singing sensation is very active in his support of Shiner's Children's Hospital. "We are both passionate about what we are doing," she said.

In addition to Leah, four other teens across the country received HALO Awards this year and their stories will be told Friday, December 11 when TeenNick will air the first-ever TeenNick Awards show at 8 p.m. on TeenNick (and at 9 p.m. on Nick At Night). Besides Justin Timberlake, other celebrities involved include LeBron James, Alicia Keys and Hayden Panettiere. Unlike most award programs, during the HALO Awards show, it will be the celebrities who will be handing out the awards.

This Wednesday, December 9, Leah and her family, along with the three other HALO Award recipients, will be in Washington, D.C. to attend a special premier screening of the TeenNick HALO Awards. The event will be hosted by Mr. Cannon and his wife, singer Mariah Carey and the guest list will also include senators representing the hometown states of the award recipients and members of Congress. Leah is planning on presenting Ms. Carey with a signature piece of Curvy Girls jewelry especially created by local Smithtown jewelry designer Stephanie Calinoff.

"All of the girls in the group wear one of the Curvy Girls necklaces. We each have a different word," said Leah of the glass necklaces that feature inspirational words such as cherish, faith and strength." She designed it white on white. It's hard to read the words unless you look at it very



Leah Stoltz, winner of a TeenNick HALO Award, with Justin Timberlake. Leah won a week-long golf trip and the opportunity to play golf with the popular singer.

closely and that's very significant. With scoliosis, you don't always know the person has it because you can't always see it. Only if you really know the person, will you be able to see it and that's very symbolic."

To kick off the awards show premier, there is a Curvy Girls fundraiser on Friday, December 11 at the Accomsett Middle School Rd, Smithtown from 6:30 to 9 p.m. "It's a \$5 donation at the door. We'll have a band, raffles, the jewelry and a magician who had scoliosis as a young boy," said Leah. As for the future, Leah, who is busy applying to colleges, hopes to expand Curvy Girls beyond Long Island. And Leah and the other Curvy Girls and

their moms are currently working on a book. Leah's mom Robin said they decided to write the book after hearing from new members how they could never find much information on scoliosis. Another Curvy Girls mom, Terry Mulvaney, who is spearheading the book project, said the book is a "compilation of memoirs contributed by ten girls and their families on their fight against scoliosis. It is our hope that the strength and courage exhibited in each of these girls will be a source of inspiration for young readers suffering from this illness." Visit the Curvy Girls website at <http://groups.google.com/group/cgssg?pli=1> for more information.