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Disabled Cadets Find Success through CAP

Before contracting two cases of COVID-19, Rylee Joyce was an active teenager who enjoyed beekeeping and ballet, even earning the distinction of Dancer of the Year in her hometown.

For Leo Olsen, life has never been normal. He was born with cerebral palsy, which affects his ability to walk.

But thanks to Civil Air Patrol policies and cadets and adult members who are eager to assist, both Joyce and Olsen are enjoying the benefits of CAP's cadet program.

And both are perfect examples of the 2024 theme for Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, observed each March. "A World of Opportunities" is the theme selected by the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, which sponsors the awareness month.

That could just as easily be the theme for Civil Air Patrol, with its myriad opportunities regardless of physical ability.

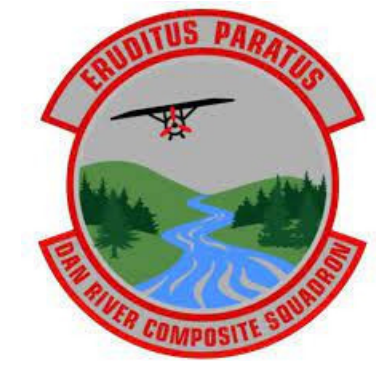
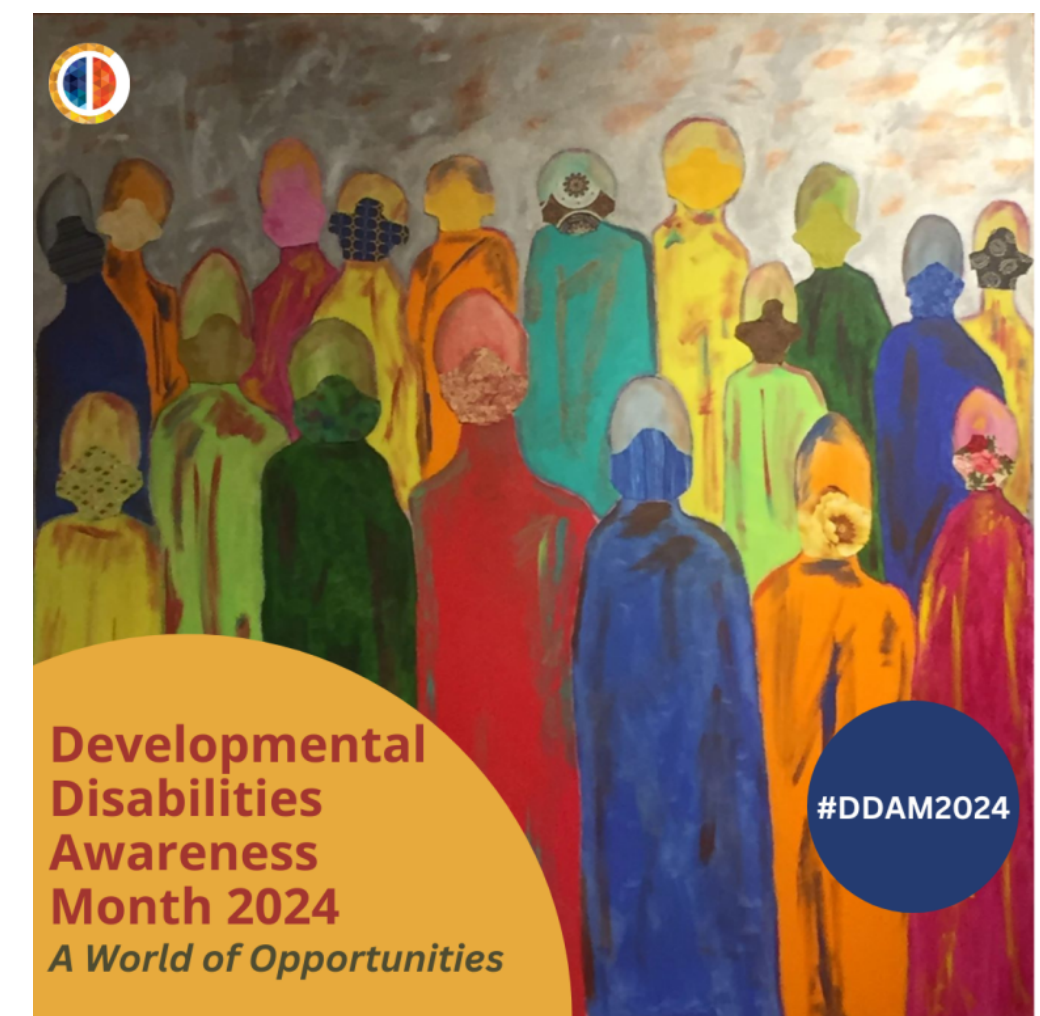
Joyce and Olsen are 17, and both are cadet second lieutenants in CAP.



Joyce is a member of the North Carolina Wing's Dan River Composite Squadron. Olsen belongs to the New Jersey Wing's Bayshore Composite Squadron.

Both have attended encampments, with excellent results.

Olsen talked with the people in charge of his two encampments beforehand to work out details. "They were very accommodating when it came to talking to me and deciding what needed to be done," he said.



The entire Joyce family is involved with CAP. Parents Dee and Kelly are first lieutenants. Olsen's brother, Reid, is a 14-year-old cadet.

Life was pretty normal in the Joyce household until Olsen contracted COVID-19 in December 2020 and again in January 2022. In March 2022 she was diagnosed with Long COVID, as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

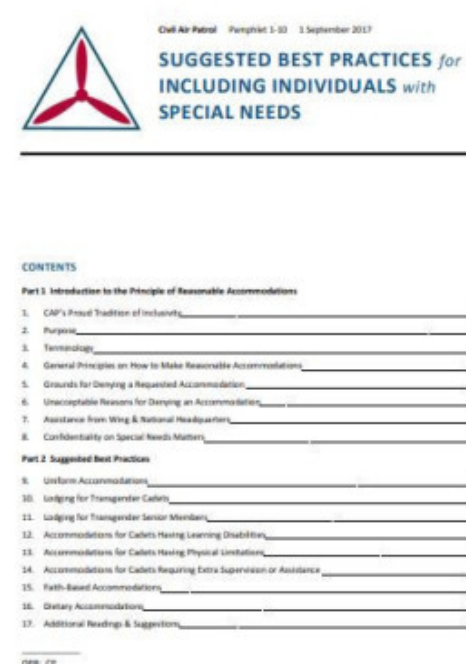
"It's been life-changing, that's for sure," her mother said.



Joyce and Olsen have both found a welcoming home in Civil Air Patrol, which emphasizes inclusion. Tammy Hallihan, Cadet Programs' national support services manager, receives frequent questions about special accommodations.

"Find a way to 'yes'" is her first suggestion.

She points to [CAP Pamphlet 1-10](#), "Suggested Best Practices for Including Individuals with Special Needs." The pamphlet covers everything from religious accommodations to lodging for transgender cadets.



Joyce and Olsen have benefited from the section on "Accommodations for Cadets Having Physical Limitations."

Olsen joined CAP three years ago and attended summer encampments in 2022 and 2023. Both times, CAP authorities allowed his dad, Frederick Olsen, to accompany the cadet, who gets around in a motorized wheelchair.

For the second encampment, the cadet was on staff as an administrative noncommissioned officer. He enjoys learning the leadership skills that CAP provides and being around others with common interests.

The two cases of COVID that Joyce endured left her with a functional gait disorder and bouts of nausea and extreme fatigue. She graduated high school at 16 and gave college a try before having to drop out because of her illness.

Joyce joined CAP in 2021 in hopes of becoming a pilot like her dad and also to take advantage of CAP's emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education.

In October 2023 she attended an encampment at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station, North Carolina. The encampment was the final requirement for earning the Gen. Billy Mitchell Award, which marks the completion of Phase II of the CAP cadet program.



Thanks to her determination and the assistance of other cadets and staff, the encampment experience proved a success, and she received the Mitchell award.

To accommodate her condition, Joyce was given a room on the first floor next to the office of the health services officer. A lot of little things went into making the experience a good one. She often experiences nausea when eating, so a staff member came to her aid. "Just eat a little bit and take this to-go box" was the suggestion.

Another time, she was given a sleeve of plain crackers to help with the nausea. She got assistance with rolling her wheelchair through damp grass, and when it rained fellow cadets loaded her and her chair into a van. She was given earplugs to minimize headaches.

A special moment came during the awards ceremony at the end.

"They put flags on the back of my wheelchair," Joyce said.

Perhaps no one outside her family knows Joyce better than Capt. Brent Wooters, commander of the Dan River squadron, who calls the cadet "our warrior." Joyce is the squadron's cadet administrative officer and works alongside her mom, who is over the administration and personnel division.

"The goal of our accommodations policy is to be inclusive of what the cadet is able to do."

— Capt. Brent Wooters

When Joyce's health started to decline, she went to Wooters and told him she wanted to leave the command staff trajectory, as she didn't want the squadron to suffer because of her condition. The administrative officer track was selected as an ideal fit.

Physical fitness is one of the requirements for promotion, and CAP finds ways to accommodate cadets based on their physician's assessment.

"The goal of our accommodations policy," Wooters said, "is to be inclusive of what the cadet is able to do."



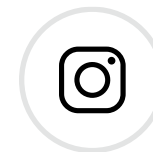
He and his wife served as the medical officers for the encampment Joyce attended and were able to help with her accommodations.

Civil Air Patrol prides itself on being an inclusive organization. That's evident in the ways CAP staff ensure cadets benefit from an encampment experience, no matter their physical abilities.

Lt. Col. Brendan P. Kearns, commander of the encampment Joyce attended, said it best. "Our goal in Civil Air Patrol is to make this possible for all cadets, who are our future leaders."

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