AJC EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE  MARTHA HAYTHORN

Living her best life

Decatur teen with Down syndrome helps special needs children.

By Helena Oliivero
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Every Wednesday, Martha Haythorn reports for duty at the Ellis Center, a non-profit organization serving children with multiple disabilities. As an intern at the school, she helps with lesson plans, leads songs during morning meetings, and offers a steady supply of support and enthusiasm.

On a recent morning, the 19-year-old assisted with a lesson centered around inclined planes, wedges and other mechanical devices that exist in our everyday life - like wheelchair ramps, axes and zippers.

“This is so interesting,” said an upbeat Haythorn, who offered specific examples of ramps and wedges in her life, from the boat ramp at her grandfather’s lake house to the wedges in her tall black boots.

Haythorn, who has Down syndrome, has volunteered at the Ellis Center for about eight years. She always knew she wanted to someday work there.

So, this past fall, the senior at Decatur High School prepared her resume and applied for an internship. She is a busy young woman with big dreams. And she’s not just defying expectations, but exceeding them.

Alison Caputo, executive director and co-founder of the Ellis Center, said Haythorn is punctual and hard-working and energetic. Haythorn also has a special ability to connect with children at the school. Most of the students are non-verbal. Haythorn connects with Caputo’s son, Damian. The 12-year-old suffered a birth injury and has multiple disabilities.

“He thinks she is so funny,” said Caputo. “She’ll sing to him, ‘Martha’s here! Martha’s here!’ She gets close to him, so he can see her and hear her. ... Martha is not afraid to touch him and let him know she’s there. She creates a friendship.”

Haythorn also volunteers with children with special needs at Westchester Elementary, a public school in Decatur, every week. And she’s a policy intern at the Georgia State Capitol with The Arc of Georgia, an organization that advocates for the human rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Currently, she’s rehearsing for the show, “Xanadu Jr.” It will run from March 7-17 at Jerry’s Habima Theatre at the Marcus Jewish Community Center.

Jerry’s Habima Theatre is Georgia’s only theatrical company directed and produced by professionals and featuring actors with special needs.

She has completed her academic classes and is now learning community-based skills, including how to navigate the city on MARTA to prepare her next step in life – college. Haythorn plans to enroll in a college program offering courses, life skills and independent living for students with intellectual disabilities. Haythorn is considering colleges close to home as well as out of state. She is touring Clemson University next month.

In Georgia and across the country, colleges are offering two- and four-year programs to help young people with intellectual disabilities prepare for jobs and their next phase in life.

In the Atlanta area, that includes Kennesaw State University, Georgia Tech and Georgia State.

Twenty years ago, Mary Amna Stoops and her husband, Trace Haythorn, learned at their 20-week ultrasound that their baby would have Down syndrome. They already had a 3-year-old son, Jacob.

“We didn’t have any experience with individuals with developmental disabilities or Down syndrome,” said Stoops, a pastor at North Decatur Presbyterian Church. “We grew up in an era when people (with Down syndrome) were segregated in schools. They rode on a ‘special’ bus and were educated separately.”

Even at a young age, little Martha loved reading, music and learning new things. She continues to be an avid reader. She’s a big fan of the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling, and she also loves the “Pretty Little Liars” series by Sara Shepard. She also loves science classes especially biology.

“One of the things that we learned early on is not to underestimate Martha,” said Stoops. “I think, in those early months, we were still operating out of not what is possible but taking in everything that was ‘different’ or ‘abnormal’ related to Martha’s development,” said Stoops. “Watching Martha’s development unfold moved us into a whole new understanding of a disability. ... The trans-Martha continued on D3
formative thing for us was when we stopped projecting an expectation of what 'should' be happening and just let Martha be Martha in her own way and in her own time."

Meanwhile, back at the Ellis Center, Caputo said she's happy to see Haythorn has developed during her time as an intern. For example, shortly after she started the internship, she got rattled when she lost track of time and nearly missed her bus. She was visibly upset, but met with her mentor at the Ellis Center. They talked it through and put together a plan. Haythorn now sets a timer on her phone to help remind her to get ready for the bus. Since then, there's been another bus mix up, but Caputo was proud of how Haythorn handled the situation.

"She was frustrated, but I saw her do self-talk, telling herself it was OK, and she held onto her emotions," said Caputo. "It's very rewarding for us to see her growth, seeing more self-awareness and self-control."

Haythorn pointed to a wide group of people — from the staff at the Ellis Center to her parents, to her teachers and classmates at Decatur schools — who have helped her achieve her goals.

"If you have a child with a disability, you can expect a lot," said Haythorn. "Don't limit us. We can achieve a lot. We might need a little more time, but we can achieve. ... If you are a parent, please don't give up on them. They need your help. And the more help you can give, the more they can achieve."

Meanwhile, Haythorn said the internship is helping her thinking about her career and a full life ahead.

"I take this job seriously, and I see this as a career path," she said. "I want to live on my own. I want to have a roommate. I want to fall in love and get married someday."

**EVENT PREVIEW**

"Xanadu Jr."  
March 7-17, $10-$35.  
Jerry's Habima Theatre Company at Marcus Jewish Community Center's Morris & Rae Frank Theatre, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. 678-812-4002. atlantajcc.org/habima.

A portion of Martha's life map at the Ellis Center.
Martha holds a wedge as a student runs his fingers across it at the Ellis Center.

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Martha Haythorn is rehearsing for Jerry's Habima Theatre's show "Xanadu Jr.,” which will run from March 7 -17 at the MJCCA's Morris & Rae Frank Theatre.

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