

BY JACOB S. FULLMER

*When two high school cheerleaders made a move to help someone else, they had no idea how much it would help them as well.*



# CHEERING EACH OTHER ON

The basketball arcs through the air and whips through the net. A timeout is called. Before play starts again, the cheering intensifies. As it morphs into words, however, it becomes clear the crowd isn't cheering for the team. "We love Brittany! We love Brittany!" bounces around the gym as a quiet girl on the sideline starts to blush.

Brittany Crockett is this year's honorary cheerleader at Syracuse High School in northern Utah. As the other cheerleaders roll through a line of backflips and handsprings, she speeds to the center of the court, closes her eyes, and does a 360 in her wheelchair.

Brittany has muscular dystrophy. And her experience as a cheerleader is proof of just how powerful kindness and determination can be.

## In the Beginning

When Brittany was only one year old, she was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD M. ROMNEY





**B**rittany has been excited about cheerleading since junior high. She believed she could do it from her wheelchair. But it wasn't until high school that friends got involved and she was finally given a chance. She has returned the favor by strengthening everyone around her. In fact, the football team was so grateful to her that they all signed a game ball (below), which she keeps on her shelf.

disease that slowly weakens the muscles until they don't work correctly. Doctors told her parents she wouldn't live another year. Fourteen years later, doctors again told her the same thing. But Brittany does try to beat the odds in just about everything.

"One time when I was little and I had more strength, I tried to stand up. I was so mad. I said to myself, 'I am going to beat this and that's that!'" she says.

With that kind of determination, trying out for the cheerleading squad didn't seem too tough. After all, Brittany is pretty much like everyone else her age, except for a few things, like her new high-powered wheelchair. Her friends talk about it like it's a brand new car.

Another difference is that when Brittany misses school because of her health, she would rather be in class than at home. And while some teens her age might obsess over fashion, she doesn't even know her own shoe size, a consequence of being physically unable to put them on. Because the disease weakens all of her muscles, she can't perform some simple things we take for granted, like being able to cough without the aid of a machine.

#### Cheering with Her

Brittany first became excited about cheerleading in junior high. It looked to her like something she could handle. As high school started, she didn't forget that feeling.

"She constantly mentioned it. Over and over again I would hear, 'I wish I could do that,'" her mom says. "And then one day, she said, 'I want to do it.'"

And with that conviction, her parents started asking around



to see what that would take.

At first, the school district said no, over concern for Brittany's health and safety. "We just kind of accepted it and moved on," Brittany says. She planned to ask again the following year, but then, a surprise phone call let her know she wouldn't have to wait.

"We had heard this girl with muscular dystrophy wanted to be a cheerleader," says Kaitlyn Glauser. Though nervous about being told no herself, she recruited the help of another friend and fellow

cheerleader, Elleny Swanson. Then the two of them did what cheerleaders are taught to do—rally support.

They generated an explosion of excitement from administrators and students alike. The district reconsidered and said with so many people urging her on, they approved. But the biggest shock came when they broke the news to Brittany.

"I just wasn't ready for it," Brittany says. She had nearly forgotten about her wish while Kaitlyn and Elleny had been asking for permission. "We wanted to make her dream come true," Elleny says.

And as her dream came true, some of the school's dreams did, too. With Brittany on the sidelines, the football team went from two wins and 11 losses the previous year, to qualifying for the state semifinals the next year. Believe it or not, the team won every game Brittany cheered for and lost every one she couldn't attend.

"The cheerleaders started calling me their lucky charm. I'd get calls, 'You've got to come! You've got to come so we can win!'" Brittany says.



## THREE CHEERS FOR FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND CHURCH

**T**here's a sign over Brittany's bed that reads, "See yourself as God sees you." That's a good summary of what others have done for her and of what she has done for friends, family, and ward members.

"At church, the other kids just take her situation and run with it," says Brittany's mother, Heidi. "They come up with ideas on how to involve her, more than I ever could."

"Her circumstance has helped us to see the very best in those around her," says her father, Doug. "She is included in a great circle of friendship."

"Brittany is an example of unwavering optimism," says fellow West Point Eighth Ward member Emily Davis, 13. "If you're having a bad day, seeing how happy she is makes your day better," says another ward member, Caitlin Steed, 12.

Brittany finds joy in simple things like studying the scriptures or walking the dog with her little sister, Ashley. "I know the time will come when my physical problems will be resolved," Brittany says. "I just don't know when, so in the meantime I try to find the blessings in my life."

With faith in her Heavenly Father, she is both cheerful and cheering others along.



**W**hether it's at a game (right) or after practice (below), Brittany finds herself surrounded by respect and love, and she reflects them to others. "She's really made an impact on all of us," says Elleny Swanson. "She has the light of Christ in her, and everyone knows it. Having that influence on the team was the extra good thing that we needed."

#### NEmore

For more photos and a video of Brittany and her family and friends, go to [newera.lds.org](http://newera.lds.org).

#### Giving Back

It would be fine if the story ended there, but don't forget that those who give service often feel the most served in return.

At games, the student body chants for Brittany as loud as they cheer for the team—if not louder. Her contagious happiness and “feisty side” create a lot of incentive for the squad members to become better individuals.

Brittany, on the other hand, is humble when talking about her own contributions. “All I’ve done is just be on the squad. I feel like I need to give them something.” The girls will tell you otherwise.

“She does so much for the squad. It makes us better people because Brittany is there. We love having her with us,” Elleny says. Their focus on helping one another has helped get rid of any high school “drama” between the girls. “We’re all very best friends,” Elleny says.



“I don’t think we really knew how big this was going to be,” Kaitlyn admits.

These youth learned a little more about what the Savior meant when He taught, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35).

“Bringing Brittany on the squad had an impact on our whole school, not just our squad—and not just Brittany’s life,” Elleny says. “It was so cool

to see how a community could come together because of one girl. That’s when you realize what it’s all about. It’s all about giving back.”

And all this happened because two young women, and then a group of high school teens, gave up thinking about themselves by going out of their way to include someone else. That’s the kind of high school history we all want to be a part of. **NE**

