

Miss Wheelchair Missouri visits Truman Elementary students

Tuesday, March 16, 2010

Rusty Murry - Nevada Daily Mail



Jennifer Gundy of On My Own Inc. stands with Miss Wheelchair Missouri, Katie Rodriguez Banister who holds a copy of one of her three books. Banister was in Nevada on Friday, March 12, to speak to students at Truman Elementary School and employees at On My Own. --Rusty Murry/Daily Mail

Miss Wheelchair Missouri, Katie Rodriguez Banister, delivered her unique message of inspiration to students at Truman Elementary School and On My Own Inc. employees during a visit to Nevada Friday.

Banister's informative and entertaining "motivational learning experience" was presented to about 30 staff members and employees of On My Own Inc. Based on her experience, the presentation focuses on overcoming difficulties and learning to cope with situations after a life-changing event.

In 1990 Banister was in an automobile accident that left her paralyzed from the chest down. She spent six months in rehabilitation and then lived with her parents for 15 months before returning to independent living, this time as a quadriplegic.

Banister began her informal presentation by saying her experience had given her a "deep level of understanding" of what care, concern and compassion really mean. "Don't feel sorry for me," she said, "I have a life." Banister went on to say that she was glad the accident happened, because "It has helped me grow in ways I couldn't have."

After relating details of the accident and her recovery, Banister told the crowd about some of the challenges of the new life she was faced with. Simple physical things like feeding herself were obstacles to be overcome. And then there were the emotional barriers.

"I was sure that no one was ever going to love me," she said. But then she met Steve Banister in Jefferson City. He lived in one city and she another, but they began seeing each other as often as possible. They have been married for 10 years now.

The Banisters' soon established their company Access-4-All, which is dedicated to "educate and empower others through motivational and disability education programs." They spend most of their time traveling to achieve that end.

Banister's presentation moves quickly through her history and on to more positive things, like how she uses several forms of assistive technology in her every day living. Her inspirational message is sprinkled with the humor of a woman who is comfortable being who she is. She told the audience of many "in the chair" firsts. Things like her first costume party where she went as someone in the electric chair. With a sharp wit and a sly grin she told how her brother used a metal bowl and some wires to make the costume realistic.

Banister continued to deliver a message of hope and strength. She shared a personal DVD montage, and some of her favorite inspirational movies as well as some favored quotes like this well-known line from Friedrich Nietzsche's "Twilight of the Idols," "What does not kill me makes me stronger." Banister added "so don't mess with me" to the famous quote.

She addressed the issue of people like herself choosing care givers and how that relationship had to be a healthy one for it to work the best. Banister kept the group interested, informed and entertained for the entire hour.

She shared her present work in schools, institutions, and other venues with an enthusiasm that was contagious. But then again, Banister is a woman of many achievements. She has received numerous accolades from the city of St. Louis and its organizations, the Governor's Council on Disability, universities and more.

Banister has written three books and uses them to help get her message to kids when she is in the schools. "Aunt Katie's Visit" is used to help kids without disabilities understand better. "A Pocket of Poems" is a collection of stories about Banister's experience and tips on how readers can express themselves through poetry and "The Personal Care Attendant Guide" teaches readers

how to find a caregiver that meets all of their needs. On My Own donated some of the books to the school after Banister's visit.

Banister delivers a strong message and keeps a hectic schedule. She signs books after every presentation and is always available to the media. "It's crazy sometimes," she said, but "I love what I get to do, because it helps people understand my culture and see past the disability." Banister's work goes hand in hand with her responsibilities as Miss Wheelchair Missouri.

The Miss Wheelchair Missouri program is not a beauty pageant. It is a competition to choose the most articulate and accomplished individual who will be a role model and spokesperson for Missouri women with disabilities. Banister will represent Missouri in the national Miss Wheelchair competition to be held in Grand Rapids, Mich., this summer.

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