

By GERRY PRINCE

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Love stories are an all too rare commodity in the world of sport.

But this is a story of a family who welcomed an adopted infant of mixed race into their family and an extraordinary teenage girl driven to find a way to eradicate the disease that is slowly robbing her dad. By most standards, Jacquelyn Phillips is your typical 16-year-old. She's got a bubbly personality and smile to match. Academically, she's never been anything less than an honor student. What's less obvious is her overwhelming drive and determination to succeed. The only thing the always-upbeat teen wants more than to find the cause and cure for Parkinson Disease right now is a full scholarship to an NCAA school where she can fulfill her goal of becoming a pediatric neurologist.

"I want to do pediatrics because I want to work with kids," explained the grade 10 Austin O'Brien student. "I coach little kids and I love that. And I have lots of little cousins and I love that. Then I want to do neurology because my dad has Parkinson's. I wanted to kind of get involved in that. I want to help other people who might go through that."

Toward that end, she spends 26 hours a week honing her talents at Champions Gymnastics. Currently, she's preparing for a meet later this month in California and the Canadian nationals scheduled for May. A typical 16-hour day begins with two hours at the gym before classes. That's followed by another two or three hours of training after school.

In addition to twice-daily training sessions she coaches up to four hours a week at the gym. "Gymnastics has taught me and a lot of people that you finish what you start," she said. "And whenever you go, you give 100 per cent."

"In school, it just kind of transferred over. It's the same thing. When I start something, I finish and do my best and not a half way kind of thing."

Roughly 50 NCAA Division I schools offer scholarships says Michel Arsenault, co-founder of Champions. The allotment of scholarships ranges from one or two per university to six or eight depending on the number of athletes retiring. Ideally, Jacquelyn, a member of Team Alberta at the 2003 Canada Winter Games, would prefer to study at Berkeley.

"Scholarships are based on the team's needs. Do they need beam or bar or do they need more floor or vault power girls?" said Arsenault, who coaches the talented teen.

"The other thing is schools are intent on choosing girls who have remained healthy and have a history of remaining healthy. Jacquelyn does. The other is academics. Is the girl good in school? She's amazing in school."

Adopted by Dwayne and Judy Phillips at three months, Jacquelyn was a regular at gymnastics by her third birthday. Mature beyond her years, the young athlete occasionally ponders what the future might have held had she not adopted by the Phillips. "I think about if I wasn't adopted and think about so many opportunities that I would have missed," she beamed. "All the traveling we've done (through gymnastics). I figure, where could I be? It could be just way different."

Bonds between parents and children don't come any stronger than the one that exists between Jacquelyn and Judy and Dwayne. The fact Dwayne appeared at Champions one afternoon last October may prove drive and determination is product of nurture rather than nature. Ravaged by the degenerative brain disorder, which affects mobility and balance, the 40-something Dwayne used public transit to make his way to Champions.

It was a moment Arsenault won't soon forget.

"All he wanted was to see his daughter train," recalled the veteran coach. "Jacquelyn saw him and was as surprised as I was. He stood in the viewing area and people were wondering who this gentleman was. They'd never seen him around. Nobody knew who he was. At one point I went to him and said, 'She's doing pretty good, Dwayne. You're probably proud of your daughter.' There wasn't a lot of dry eyes in the place, it was pretty touching."