



# NEWS RELEASE

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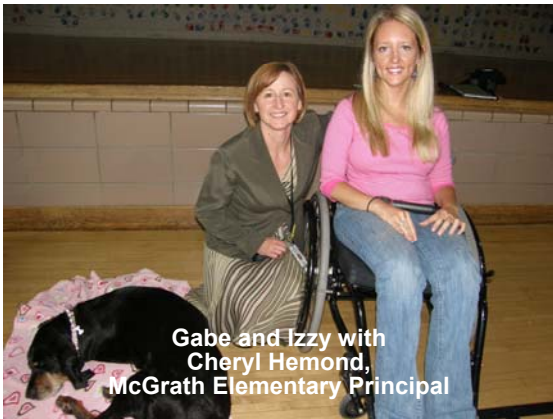
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## LOCAL WOMAN AND HER CANINE COMPANION TEACH GRAND BLANC STUDENTS NOT TO BULLY



Twenty-eight-year-old Fenton resident Gabrielle “Gabe” Ford visited Grand Blanc’s McGrath Elementary on June 4<sup>th</sup> to speak to students about the damaging and lifelong effects of bullying. She shared with them her first-hand experiences with classmates who physically and emotionally harmed her as she struggled with a rare disease.

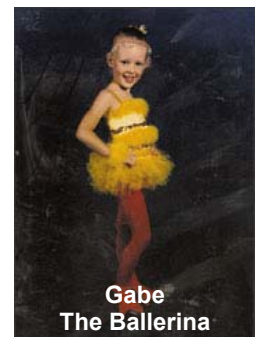
Gabe’s parents began to notice subtle changes in her speech and gait when she was merely 12 years old. The budding ballerina was suddenly off-balance, clumsy and was slurring her words. After months of worry and a battery of tests at Ann Arbor’s University Hospital, Gabe was diagnosed with a rare genetic neuromuscular disease called Friedreich’s Ataxia, a disease that causes irreparable damage to the nervous system.

As the disease progressed through her years in middle school and high school, Gabe’s symptoms grew worse. She knew that the disease had already robbed her of her dream to become a dancer, and that it would soon take away her ability to walk. But being a typical teenager, she wanted to blend in with the other kids, which was easy to do in the comfort of the school she had attended all of her life, surrounded by friends she had known for many years.

But then suddenly her parents moved to a new house and Gabe was thrust into a different school with people she didn’t know. She describes that phase of her life as “scary.” She didn’t have any friends at the new school and many of the kids didn’t understand why she talked and walked the way she did. She tried to hide her disease from her classmates. She told the McGrath students that, while not all of the kids were mean to her, many were. They would push books out of her hands and laugh at her as she struggled to retrieve them. Sometimes they would trip her as she walked past them. Already unsteady on her feet, it didn’t take much effort to cause her to fall.

Gabe became so distraught and traumatized by their behavior that she was afraid to tell anyone. Finally, her mother noticed bruises on her legs and figured out that Gabe was being bullied by other students at school. She quickly elicited the help of the school’s principal who spoke to the offenders about Gabe’s disease. Some – but not all – of the bullying stopped.

After graduation she was lonely and depressed and confined to a wheelchair. She had become “angry at everyone who had been mean to me.” Feeling that she had no friends, she begged her mother for a dog.



Although her mother was at first resistant to the idea, she came to realize that caring for a dog could help Gabe overcome her depression and restore her feelings of self-worth. So, four days before her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, a coonhound named Izzy (short for Building a Mystery) came into Gabe's life.

"Having Izzy made me feel like I was alive again," Gabe explained to the McGrath students. "Suddenly I was able to go out in public and talk to people – something I hadn't done in a long time."

But in a cruel and ironic twist of fate, Izzy became ill a few years ago and was diagnosed with a rare muscular disease similar to Gabe's. Although still able to travel to speaking engagements with Gabe, Izzy's mobility is slowly – but surely - declining.

In spite of her own difficulties, Gabe is determined to share her journey as a survivor of school bullying with her beloved Izzy at her side. She asked McGrath students to pledge that they would not bully and would tell a trusted adult if they, or anyone they knew, were being bullied. She invited the students to write to her at her email address: FentonRH@aol.com and promised to respond to any of the students who contacted her.

Gabe left the students with this final message "Bullying is a choice. Don't make the wrong choice."

***Note: Gabe and Izzy's story has been featured on the Today Show and Animal Planet.***



McGrath Elementary students warmly welcomed Gabrielle "Gabe" Ford, who spoke to them about her experiences as a victim of bullying.