

Soaring high



'POOR LITTLE ME' DOESN'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

BY DEBRA MINOR WILSON
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FAIRMONT — Adversity can crush a spirit.

Or it can give it the wings of a butterfly, letting it soar higher and higher.

Rob Olszewski knows about adversity.

The 35-year-old computer programmer has lived with cerebral palsy, endured many surgeries, triumphed over trials.

"I could have said 'Woe is me,'" he said in a telephone interview from his home in Gibsonia, Pa.

"But I overcame the hurdles of my disability and realized that I could use my story to inspire others."

When he was 17, he almost died from a perforated appendix.

"It wasn't because of my disability but in a way it was," he said. He doesn't feel pain as acutely as others and for days thought he had the flu. When he collapsed, his mother rushed him to the hospital where four days later, his appendix ruptured during exploratory surgery.

"The doctor walked in and told me I should not be alive. Right there and then, something told me I was meant to do something with my life.

"So I'm using my experiences and my disability to inspire others. I use my condition to help other people."

He combines his gifts as a Distinguished Toastmaster to relate his experiences with cerebral palsy to various groups.

He will speak to the God's Special Gifts support group at 3 p.m. Sunday, March 21, at Bridgeport United Methodist Church. The church is located at 251 Worthington Drive, Bridgeport.

He doesn't get angry or upset about why he has cerebral palsy.

"God finds a place for special needs children. There's a reason why he placed me with them," he said.

He realized that reason in 2003, when his father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He remembered something his mother had always told him.

"She always said I had



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Inspirational and motivational speaker Rob Olszewski will speak at the God's Special Gifts support group at 3 p.m. Sunday, March 21, at the Bridgeport United Methodist Church. For more information, call the church at 304-842-6284.

my hand in hers while I was growing up. Now she had her hands in mine."

His condition was caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain during birth, affecting his right side with muscular degeneration. His right leg is shorter than the left and he must wear shoes with lifts.

He's had 10 surgeries. He had to spend 10 weeks in a cast, bound to a wheelchair.

"No, that was not fun," he said. "That was the low part of my life."

"But I lead a normal life," he said with pride. "I'm not hindered. I don't have a 'woe is me' attitude. Don't take pity on me."

Then again, he was always active as a child, helping his father on their farm. He went camping with friends, took a canoe trip on the Susquehanna River, learned to drive quads, earned two college degrees.

In 1986, when he was 11, he was featured in a documentary for a United Cerebral Palsy Telethon in 1986, which was introduced nationally by the late John Ritter.

"'Poor little me' doesn't get you anywhere," he said.

He became involved in Toastmasters in 2001 and is currently public relations officer for District 13, which encompasses parts of West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio. He earned the title

Distinguished Toastmaster, and has served as club and district officer, and is involved in the High Performance Leadership Program.

"This was not given to me. I earned it," he said.

"It was a lot of hard

work.

"I believe God gave me this disability to show people that He does give life to the disabled and uses them in His big plan.

"Even though I was born with this disability, I am able to hold a job. I have a computer programming degree, went to two colleges. I am a good role model."

A friend who works with children told Olszewski something he'll never forget.

"I want those kids to be around you, to spend time with you, to see what you go through," the friend said. "I want to show them that even though you're disabled, you still lead a good life because of your attitude."

That pretty much sums up Rob Olszewski's outlook. "You could sit around the house doing nothing. You could say, 'Woe is me. I have this disability.'

"But just remember. If you want to do something, you can do it."

Melanie Groves met Olszewski at a Toastmasters Leadership Institute Training workshop in January.

She saw he had a disability, but soon realized that it was not a handicap, at least not for him.

She has a special needs son and is active in a support group at her church.

Could he help her out by speaking to the group?

"We talked at length about his disability and how he got from there to where he is now ... Distinguished Toastmaster ... college degrees ... a job.

"I asked if he'd be the guest speaker at our support group one Sunday."

"When?" he asked, and she knew he was in.

He will address the group March 21 about overcoming the obstacles his disability has challenged him with.

He will also be recognized that morning during worship service and treated to an Easter egg hunt following lunch.

"I was blown away that he has this disability and overcome these obstacles and to go as far as he has," Groves said.

"And he says he will go even further."

God's Special Gifts is about a year old.

"It was a dream for me to meet with together special needs families in our church," Groves said.

It now has up to 10 families attending the monthly meetings. The group also has special activities, such as field trips.

"We're seeking to go further with God's help and a lot of prayers," she said.

Her son, who will be 11 in June, has cerebral palsy with a severe seizure disorder and feeding disability.

The group is an outreach of the church.

"Anyone is welcome to come," Groves said.

"We work with the family as a unit. You don't have to have a baby sitter and you don't have to be a member of the church. Our doors are always open."

For more information on the group, call Groves at 304-842-1916, the church at 842-6284, visit bridgeportumc.org or e-mail matt.groves@usa.net.

E-mail Debra Minor Wilson at dwl-wilson@timeswv.com.

