



“I’m finally a movie star!” These are the words that Hannah exclaimed as she entered the Gaylord Hotel and saw the red carpet in the lobby. My family stayed at the Gaylord Hotel, on the banks of the Potomac River, to attend the “Yes I Can!” Awards Ceremony for my youngest daughter, Hannah. Hannah was one of twenty-seven international award winners receiving recognition in one of nine categories. The Council for Exceptional Children honors children and youth with disabilities who excel in their communities at the yearly International Convention and Expo. This year, the Convention was held April 25th – 28th at the Gaylord Hotel and Convention Center in National Harbor Maryland.

I was fortunate to receive the Tony Molinaro Scholarship which enabled me to attend the Convention with the added benefit of the “Yes I Can” activities. The down side of being the mother of an award winner was that I did not have much time to attend sessions at the Convention. I did manage to attend part of a session on Autism and spent some time on Wednesday and Thursday at the Expo. It was worth it just to see all the exhibits and materials at the Expo.

Hannah attended school on Monday and we arrived at the hotel in Maryland on Tuesday afternoon. Practice for the ceremony was at 11:00 on Wednesday and then CEC had a luncheon for the families (with participation in a Flash Mob Dance in between). Arrival time for the ceremony was 4:30, and a reception was held afterward. We were fortunate because many of our Georgia leaders met Hannah at the ceremony including: Emily Collins, Past President of CASE and Executive Director of G-CASE; Luann Purcell, Executive Director of CASE; Sandy McDonald, President of GA CEC; Julie Reffel, President Elect of GA CEC; and Chris Horton, President of G-CASE.

Thursday was spent on a tour to the Capitol and other sites around Washington D.C. Two tour buses took the award winners and their families on an incredible visit to our Nation's Capital and each of the four groups was accompanied by volunteers from CEC. Hannah was thrilled to get to see the White House, but she did not understand why she could not go knock on the door to see President Obama.

To understand a little more about Hannah and the reasons she won the award in the category of extracurricular, I will quote from the press release sent by CEC to our local newspaper.

“Hannah was born with Down syndrome and functions at an intellectual level lower than that of her peers. As a young child, she was also diagnosed with type I diabetes, requiring her to learn how to check her blood sugar and give herself insulin injections several times per day. Recently, Hannah was also diagnosed with celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder characterized by intolerance of gluten, further limiting her food intake. But despite these challenges, she continues to be a positive and upbeat young lady.

Hannah abounds with such enthusiasm that she is a role model to her peers, teachers, and community. She participates in Girl Scouts, Special Olympics, Anchor Club, and her church youth group. But her greatest passion is cheerleading for Madison County High School, where she is a senior. Additionally, Hannah was voted by the entire student body as Homecoming Queen for the 2010-11 school year.

Hannah's visibility in the community inspires those around her and helps break down common stereotypes of people with disabilities.

‘Hannah does not stand out in a crowd because of her disabilities; instead, she stands out because of her abilities: kindness, courage, determination, empathy, and willingness to help others,’ says Allen McCannon, Madison County School Superintendent.”

CEC's mission is to improve the quality of life for individuals with exceptionalities and their families through professional excellence and advocacy. The award winners and their families who attended the “Yes I Can!” Awards Ceremony and related activities would consider this mission accomplished. The royal treatment we received will be a lifelong highlight for our family and Hannah's dream of being a movie star was fulfilled. I encourage everyone to look at the “Yes I Can!” Award criteria on CEC's website and nominate a deserving student who might represent Georgia at next year's convention.