

## **Lauren Hunter – Our Lady of the Visitation – Mother of Mercy High School**

Children and adults, who are mentally or physically disabled, are often ignored or misunderstood by society. Many people are afraid to interact with them, because of how they look or act. Often times, they are bullied because of their disability. But the truth is, they are people too. They have feelings and seek friendship. Many are never given the opportunity to speak for themselves or show who they are. For two years now, I have been a part of two programs, WOW and Spectrum. These programs allow children and adults to have a voice as well as learning to dance. Dancing is something that many disabled children want to do, but are unable to because there are turned down by studios because of their disabilities.

WOW stands for Wonder on Wheels and it is a class for wheel chair bound adults and children, who would like to learn how to dance. Dancers at the studio, myself included, are partnered with someone in a wheelchair. We help teach them choreography and serve as their legs and arms at various times. We are their shadows and allow them to experience dance in the spotlight. We even perform and compete a routine with them at competitions. Spectrum, on the other hand, is for children with autism. We are partnered with an autistic child and help them learn basic dance skills and perform a routine with them at recital. These programs give girls and boys a chance to show that they are more than their disability. Dancing is an enormous part of my life, and knowing that I am making dancing a reality for others is one of the best feelings in the world.

My WOW partner is Paige; she is eighteen years old. She suffers from Rett Syndrome. She has suffered from this her whole life, but has never let it stop her. When she comes to the studio she always has the biggest smile on her face, and you can tell that this is what she looks forward to every week. I have to be there for her every week because this is what she loves to do. My Spectrum partner is Ava and she is six years old. She has autism. She is always filled with energy and excitement. My job is to keep her focused, and to help her learn dance steps. These girls mean the world to me, and I don't want to let them down. I have affected their life by giving them an opportunity that was not available to them. I help make their dreams and goals a reality. My dance studio is my second home and it is theirs too. My goal for them is to never give up on themselves. Even though I have affected them, they have shown me things about myself as well. They have shown me that I can be a leader and that I can be strong. I have made a commitment to them and try my hardest every week to make it to class. Aubrey affected many people in her short life, and so have Paige and Ava. I hope that I have affected them and made an impact in their life like they did in mine.

