

Miss 2008 Wheelchair America Promotes the Sport of Dragon Boating

Michelle Colvard has never believed in setting limits. She had an active, outdoor childhood filled with activities such as treeclimbing, roller skating and bike riding. Her penchant for health and wellness activities is partly why the 32-year old, who was born with spina bifida, was appointed to both the Mayor's Wellness Council and the Houston Commission on Disabilities a year and a half ago by Houston's Mayor Bill White.

Due to her condition, Michelle spent her childhood in and out of a wheelchair and has needed permanent mobility assistance since the age of 11. Not having the chance to participate in team sports as a young girl, Michelle mainly watched and cheered from the sidelines.

Michelle spent her young adulthood searching for ways to stay healthy and active, participating in wheelchair basketball and kayaking to keep up her upper body strength. "I realized that there wasn't much focus on and there weren't a lot of resources dedicated to the overall health and wellness of people with disabilities," remarks Michelle. She committed to doing her own research, eventually earning both a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Houston as well as a Master's degree in public health from the University of Texas.

Upon graduation, she became heavily involved in city advocacy issues. Her appointments to both the Houston Mayor's Wellness Council as well as the Houston Commission on Disabilities enabled her to speak out on behalf of fellow Houstonians to ensure that equal opportunities present themselves in civic, community and governmental activities.

One such opportunity presented itself three years ago, when the Texas Dragon Boat Association came before the Mayor's Wellness Council to promote its cause. Michelle immediately was drawn to the teamwork and fitness aspects the sport offered. What further intrigued Michelle about dragon boating was its broad appeal toward any level of competition – athlete or amateur – and that it was a sport she could be involved in alongside friends without disabilities. Michelle participated in a practice race and subsequently found herself paddling with a winning El Paso corporate team when they needed additional female paddlers. And a fellow paddler later built Michelle an ergonomic seat, much like that in a race car – portable but lower for added stability to keep strength concentrated on the upper body to help her stay seated on the small wooden bench in the boat.

Since joining the sport of dragon boating, Michelle, whose husband, Brian also paddles, has recruited members, spoken as part of a festival kickoff in 2005 and helped facilitate an introduction that same year to Peggy Turner of the Houston Parks and Recreation Department to coordinate the bringing together of a new, vision-impaired team – Blind Fury.

As another example of Michelle's set-no-limits achievements, in late 2007, she was approached to enter the Miss Wheelchair Texas pageant. Due to her busy job obligations, she was unsure as to whether or not she should enter. Upon learning more about the organization and the opportunities it offered to expand advocacy efforts state-wide, coupled with the encouragement of friends, colleagues and her husband, Michelle not only participated but was crowned Miss Wheelchair Texas in February 2008. In late-July of this year, she participated in a week-long process of participating in Miss Wheelchair America and was crowned the national titleholder soon thereafter.

"The best part was meeting so many accomplished, inspiring women. I encourage other women in wheelchairs to become involved. It's a chance to meet and network with other accomplished women. I learned a tremendous amount from each of them about how to become a better advocate," remarks Michelle. Since earning her titles, Michelle has had to balance a busy work schedule with in-state appearances, including Shriner Hospital, the Ronald McDonald House and various local sporting events.

For more information regarding dragon boating, visit www.texasdragonboat.com.

For more information regarding the Houston mayor's wellness council, visit www.getmovinghouston.com