

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE WITH PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

Paige Whitfield spends only one hour at school each day due to a chronic disease.

by Drew Johnson
djohnson440@g.fhsdschools.org

Senior Paige Whitfield's day at North ends when the first hour bell rings. Though ahead on credits, her academic preparedness isn't what permits her to leave, but rather her recent diagnosis.

"In June [of 2023] I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis," Paige said. "One of the things that can cause flare-ups is stress and so [I leave early] to reduce the amount of flare-ups because each one shortens your life."

Although diagnosed months ago, Paige still experienced symptoms of her future diagnosis far before visiting the doctor.

"I had symptoms for about a year," Paige said. "My feet [would] hurt but when it was massaged it went away. Then it started from my feet to my legs to my torso. Then it exacerbated itself in February and came back again in March. So, I finally got an MRI and EKG."

Many of the activities that Paige once enjoyed had to be reduced to accommodate for her diagnosis. Because of her low energy span, physical activities often yielded challenges.

"[I used to be able to] walk longer, I could do like 30-45 minute workouts daily, I could bike for hours, and just do everything without having to wait for a break," Paige said. "After diagnosis, I would have to limit myself to maybe 25 minutes of workouts."

Even though physical activities are the most noticeable side effect of Multiple Sclerosis to an outside spectator, Paige still struggles with completing actions that require extensive mental focus.

"[A symptom] is fatigue so I am always tired," Paige said. "When I go home, I get to sleep because I need to and I also do almost all my other classes online. It just helps me relax my body. [I can] take a nap if I need to

and not feel guilty or have to trek upstairs."

Multiple Sclerosis can lead to a major change in school performance for a student. Though, even with her diagnosis, Paige still manages to maintain high grades.

"She's exceptional and maintained all A's in school," Paige's mom Nouelle Whitfield said. "She also has an AP Spanish class. It doesn't stop her, she's very hardworking. She's able to be successful despite her being very tired and not being able to drive [a car]

like everyone else."

Paige has maintained her academic excellence far enough to even earn herself a Seal of Biliteracy in Spanish, a confirmation of fluency.

"When I graduate I want to be a Spanish interpreter," Paige said. "Literacy will help me to get interpreting jobs. For me, [I want] to just continue in my journey, and I want to continue expanding my knowledge and grammar to do my best."

Paige's Spanish ambitions haven't gone unnoticed either. The one course she comes to school each day to take is her Spanish class.

"She is an outstanding student and I didn't expect her to change academically or socially," Paige's AP Spanish Language and Culture teacher Brian Santos said. "She is tenacious because I think that she overcomes a lot of challenges successfully and with a lot of determination."

Although Paige continued her Spanish ambitions post-diagnosis, many of her other passions didn't align with her conditions.

"She was enrolled in the University of Chicago for American Sign Language," Nouelle said. "She couldn't use her hands to sign and she wasn't able to complete the course because she couldn't sign."

With a condition that requires as much attention as Multiple Sclerosis, many aspects of a family relationship can be affected.

"I still work partly," Nouelle said. "I will drive her to school in the morning, if she had NHS I would have to drive her to school even earlier. I'd have to wait at school because she's only there for one hour so I'd wait to take her home. I have to go to doctor appointments and go to hospitals for treatment. With her school and my work and having to take care of the household, I have a busy life."

With all of the negatives surrounding her diagnosis, Paige still manages to find ways to grow as a person and utilize her condition to understand others better.

"I am feeling a little more empathetic to people who might be going through something," Paige said. "I want to be more patient because you don't know really what's going on in their lives."

Paige relies on her religious beliefs to encourage herself to continue to push for the future.

"I am Jehovah's Witness and I fully believe in a new world called Paradise where all ailments will be healed," Paige said. "It keeps me hopeful for the future."



Paige Whitfeild works on a music assignment for her Spanish 5 class during 1st hour. Whitfeild only comes to school 1st hour for her Spanish 5 class and does the rest of her classes online at home. This is Whitfeild's first year doing online classes. (Photo by Faith Smith, Illustration by Violet Newton)

FAST FACTS

Below are some facts about Multiple Sclerosis. (Information from Healthline)

An estimated 1.8 million people have Multiple Sclerosis around the world.

Around 5,000 children who live in the U.S have Multiple Sclerosis.

Females are three times more likely to get Multiple Sclerosis than males.

8 percent of people diagnosed develop a worsened version of Multiple Sclerosis.

Lifetime costs of people diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis is around \$4.1 million.

Yearly costs for those diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis averages \$30,000 to \$100,000.

NORTH STAR • FHNtoday.com • @FHNtoday • 01.17.2024 • Pages Designed by Drew Johnson • In-Depth



On Dec. 15, in an honors biology class, Mrs. Soltysiak helps freshman Aaron Visnack with his murder mystery blood type lab. (Photo by Jupiter Stephens, Illustration by Violet Newton)

FIGHTING SCHEDULE FIRES

Samantha Soltysiak is a teacher and parent who manages an irregular and hectic schedule

by Drew Johnson
djohnson440@g.fhsdschools.org

Being a tennis coach, science teacher and full-time parent is no simple task. Samantha Soltysiak does this all while simultaneously deciding how to juggle an active personal and professional balance. Soltysiak occasionally spends extra time at

school, complicating her family's schedule.

"I work over contract hours," Soltysiak said. "Sometimes I'm here anywhere up to six o'clock at night prepping for labs. So, it's pretty inconsistent with my preps that I have."

In addition to her irregular schedule, Soltysiak's husband Ben McMahon is a fireman for the Florissant Valley Fire Protection District. Unlike other professions, firefighters spend days on end at a fire station rather than returning home each night. McMahon works for two days straight and then has a four day break. On top of his non-traditional work schedule, McMahon is periodically required to complete additional work.

"He sometimes gets forced overtime," Soltysiak said. "So, if they are at the firehouse and it's his second day there, he could be forced to work [extra] if he's present."

With busy schedules, challenges are likely

to come up. On days when her children don't have daycare and her husband is working, Soltysiak is forced to improvise to ensure her kids have supervision.

"We have daycare Monday, Wednesday and Fridays but it's only part-time," Soltysiak said. "We sometimes get into situations where we may have to take off of work a day to make sure there's childcare for the kids. Sometimes, I have had to bring my kids into school to hang out with me for the day."

Soltysiak still manages to provide essential services for her students and athletes despite her schedule challenges.

"I really admire Mrs. Soltysiak because she seems very stressed, but is always able to bring everything together at the end," junior Angel Tolota, who is a part of the tennis team and is a former student of Soltysiak, said.

Even with a hectic schedule, Soltysiak and her husband have found ways to keep themselves afloat and learn from the chaos

in their lives.

"I have definitely built time management and organizational strategies," Soltysiak said. "My husband and I have had to communicate on every aspect and level to make sure that all bases are covered. I think that it's taught me to be resilient to that, although it's tough. In the moment, it's still worth it."

Soltysiak uses her developed skills to enjoy her busy schedule as much as possible.

"In the end, like when tennis season is over, and I've had a successful season, my kids are still talking about the match that they went to or whatever. To me, that is a fulfilling feeling," Soltysiak said. "So, just stick it out, because you end up feeling very happy in life and feeling like what you're doing, there's a purpose to it. Also, it has always kept me on my toes. I think, although I look like I'm aging, it keeps me young."