

'A special spark'

Union Grove student excelling after life-altering accident

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UNION GROVE — She had been snowboarding for years, so Natalie Nelson Markham whizzed down the hill with confidence.

But when a smaller child crossed in front of her, Markham turned abruptly and lost control. She went airborne off a dangerous jump, and landed hard flat on her back.

Five days later, doctors delivered the horrifying news: At age 15, she was paralyzed from the waist down.

The irrepressible young girl who played volleyball and tennis, who climbed trees and wrestled with friends, who was always game for any daredevil stunt, suddenly faced a future in which she would never walk again.

The prospect of life in a wheelchair set Markham on a journey that would lead her from anger and despair to acceptance and resolve. It would awaken a spirit in her while also inspiring those around her.

Now in her senior year at Union Grove High School, Markham has come to embrace her disability, because it is empowering her to accomplish what she always hoped for — to make a difference.

"This is, I guess, my dream," she said.

Markham has won the respect and admiration of her schoolmates while building a resume of achievement: President of the FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America. A member of the National Honor Society. Manager of both the girls volleyball and basketball teams. Homecoming queen.

As she prepares for college



SUBMITTED

Natalie Nelson Markham enjoys her moment as the 2023 homecoming queen at Union Grove High School.

next year, Markham, 17, recently started modeling. She hopes to study broadcast journalism and pursue a career in TV news.

A Milwaukee radio station recently recognized her as "Superhero Of The Week," giving her a chance to tell her story on the air.

Union Grove High School Principal Joel Adamczyk, who nominated her for the Superhero honor, said Markham has been a force of nature at school. She shows up every day with a positive outlook, and is always looking for ways to help others, he said.

Looking ahead to graduation

next spring, Adamczyk said he is certain that the spirited homecoming queen has a bright future.

"She is going to be something special," he said. "She's going to make her mark — I guarantee it."

Growing up in Mount Pleasant with three sisters, Markham attended Gifford School in the Racine Unified School District. The family lived on a hobby farm with horses and pigs. Markham was active in 4H and participated in livestock shows at the Racine County Fair.

The young girl also played tennis with her family, attended

church, and competed in sports at school. Always looking for new challenges, she started snowboarding when she was about 11.

"Anything that keeps me active, I'm willing to do, I'm willing to try," she said.

On Feb. 22, 2020, she headed to Alpine Valley Ski Resort in Walworth County for a Saturday of snowboarding on the slopes. It was two days before her 15th birthday.

The ski hill was crowded, with many smaller children on skis and snowboards. The accident happened early in the morning. Markham remembers lying on her back, and then being whisked away in an ambulance.

After five days in a hospital bed, including her birthday, she underwent a surgery that confirmed her worst fears. Doctors would not be able to repair her broken vertebrae. She was paraplegic.

Two months of physical therapy and wheelchair instruction followed. Markham returned home to Mount Pleasant just as 8th grade was winding down at Gifford School. She finished the school year at home, spending her days wondering about the future and her nights crying in bed.

"I was mad every single day," she said. "Why did I deserve this?"

In the fall, she enrolled at Case High School in Racine, but transferred to Union Grove, largely because of the school's agriculture curriculum and activities.

Katie Hagemann, ag instructor and faculty adviser to the FFA, said she had never before had a student who used a wheelchair. Approaching the new freshman delicately at first, she found that Markham had an outgoing and feisty personality that was disarming.

Markham joined FFA and