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Sisters team to down disorder

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Miriah Millis has earned a Certificate of Excellence from the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards for her many volunteer activities. And she has her sister, in part, to thank for it.

Miriah Millis, 16, is an honors student at Fairview High School. Hillary Millis, 17, attends Girard High School, which hosts a regional life skills program for students with disabilities. She has Down syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes delays in development.

Together the girls watch music videos, bake cookies, shop and style each other's hair.

"We're close in age, so we grew up together," Miriah Millis said. "We're good friends and I'm sure we'll stay good friends when we grow up."

They also enjoy Special Olympics bowling and therapeutic horseback riding, Hillary as an athlete and Miriah as a volunteer.

Horseback riding is used as rehabilitation therapy to improve posture, muscle tone, motor development and emotional well-being in children and adults with a range of disabilities.

"Even kids that are in wheelchairs all day can get on the horse and ride," said Miriah Millis, who has volunteered with TREC since age 13.

For safety's sake, riders wear helmets and belts with loops on them so a "side-walker" can hold on to them.

"I'll hold on to the loops to make sure the riders don't fall. Or as a leader, I'll direct the horse around the obstacle course," Miriah Millis said. "But we usually try to encourage the kids to direct the horses themselves. It really helps out their self-confidence."

TREC is held at the Willows Equestrian Center in Fairview for four months a year beginning in April. Each winter, Miriah Millis helps her sister and other Special Olympians bowl at Westway Lanes in Girard.

"I help out with the kids in the wheelchairs or those that need help on the approaches," Miriah Millis said. "In some cases there's a ramp for the kids to get their ball started, and I'll help them pick it up and roll it down."

Miriah Millis enjoys the experience almost as much as the bowlers.

"The bowling helps their self-confidence and social skills. And it's fun for them," she said.

On her own, Miriah Millis volunteers at the Second Harvest Food Bank and is vice president of Fairview High School's Key Club. Through it she has been involved with Habitat for Humanity and raised funds for the Angel Tree and the Caring Place.

She and classmate Cassie Quiggle also created the Web site for the K.A.T.I.E. project at Fairview Middle School. Kids Achieving Through Improved Efforts is a thank-you and reward program for students who improve their behavior.

It is named in honor of Katie Westbrook, once a friend of Miriah Millis. Westbrook died of cancer four years ago.

Key Club adviser Joan Martter thinks it's time that Miriah Millis gets something back for all that she's given. Martter nominated her for the Spirit of Community Award presented by Prudential Financial and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

"Miriah is never one that would bring a lot of attention to herself or brag about anything she does," Martter said. "Whatever we need, she's always right there to help. She's just an all-around great kid."

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