

Will on Wheels

by Tyler Mertins



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Photographs and Words by Tyler Mertins

William Johnston is a junior at University High School in Morgantown, West Virginia. From volunteering at a toy drive, to being a member of extracurricular school groups, he's very active in the community. He plays trumpet in the marching band, the state champion jazz ensemble and wind ensemble. He's also a member of National Honors Society and a boy scout. He's able to excel in all of these things despite his physical condition. William was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, which has stunted his growth and confined him to a wheelchair.

William lives in the Cheat Lake area with his mother, Frances, and his older brother, David, who is a senior at UHS. His father passed away a few years ago while serving in the Marines. Will also has a dog named Thurin. He spends a lot of time with his family and is always surrounded by friends. William is always the life of the party whether it's being with the band, boy scouts, church or just having a gathering at his house.

The most remarkable thing about William is that he does everything he possibly can on his own. He understands that his disability gets in the way sometimes of doing things us "walkers" do. But he doesn't let it stop him from living a full, rewarding life. He takes it all in stride with his self-deprecating humor. Out of all the kids at University High, he may be the one of the most well-loved and outgoing. There's always someone coming over to say hello.

After graduating from high school, William plans on attending WVU. He wants to go into medicine or music or both. He isn't quite sure how to combine them at this point.



William's profile in the UHS band composite





A band member calls out to William for a high-five after a performance at Milan Puskar Stadium. He tries to reach with his hand, but doesn't quite have the length. So Will uses his trumpet to make the connection.



UHS band director Mark Palmer conducts the National Anthem before the University vs. Parkersburg South football game.





Previous page: The Boy Scouts of the Mountaineer Area Council close their fall Court of Honor ceremony with a song. The ceremony awards Scouts with merit badges and rank promotions. William earned several new merit badges. Right: William does a skit with his friend, Danny at the fall Court of Honor ceremony at Camp Mountaineer outside of Morgantown. Will is known as the "great fortune teller" and can tell the future by smelling someone's shoe.





William's mother, Frances, and his older brother, David, cut the Tardis cake for their Dr. Who watch party, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the show.



David decides that the family dog, Thurin, should wear a fez for the party as well.

William, Frances and David are all fans of Dr. Who. The show had aired earlier in the day, but William and his mom had to travel to Charleston with the marching band for University's playoff game against Capital. David recorded the show for them while they were gone. They came home around 8:00 p.m. and immediately hosted the party despite the questionable weather.





William walks Thurin on a mild fall day. The dog is just as much his responsibility as his mom and brother. Will says he likes to let Thurin pull him around sometimes.



Top: William goes to chess and game club on most Fridays. This game seems to be going his way. Bottom left: Will and his brother David set up a game of Wings of War. Bottom middle: He eyes the prize--his opponent's king. Bottom right: Will directs his opponent where to move his piece during his turn.





At the Hoss Foundation toy drive at UHS, William volunteers wrapping presents with his mom. Frances argues that Will should be very detailed with the gift wrapping, but he says, "No one cares! You know what you do with wrapping paper? You throw it away!" William is almost always with his mother and they are very close.







Previous page: William keeps the tempo for the band during fundamental block at the beginning of practice. He hits a glock block with a drum stick to keep the beat as he coaches the band on marching technique. Above: The wheelchair might get in the way of marching, but it makes it easier to carry around your gear.



Frances holds William's trumpet case open for him to help him put it away after the Morgantown High School Band Spectacular at Milan Puskar Stadium in Morgantown.



William was featured in this year's field show, which was the music of Stevie Wonder. In some shows, he got to be the trumpet soloist.



Though William is an important and integrated part of the UHS marching band, there are times he is separated.



Left: William became a member of National Honor Society as a junior this year. The organization recognizes outstanding high school students. Right: Will hangs out with his close friends Danny (left) and Tesla (right) after the NHS induction. Will calls it "the cult... one of us, one of us."



William has known Tesla since the fifth grade. They are both juniors at University High. Tesla is also a prolific musician and plays violin in the high school's orchestra.

This was the first time I was ever extensively immersed in still photography. Though this experience with William was scary and frustrating at times, I truly believe I have made a new friend. It was very rewarding to reconnect again with my alma mater and my former marching band program. Some things never change. William, his mother Frances, and his brother David are some of the nicest people you will meet. They were always very accommodating and very willing to work with me. There might have been a few times where Will said to me, "Did you really just take a picture of that? Delete it! Delete it!" He has a very positive attitude and always makes me or anyone around him laugh. I found out that he and I have a lot of common interests and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect subject to spend hours and hours with just to get to know and photograph.

Tyler Mertins





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