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Screen test

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Look out Hollywood, there's a new filmmaker on the loose.

Nine-year-old Colton McGrath of Abington recently produced a short film designed to educate his classmates about his condition, cerebral palsy.

"He did this to teach them about his disability and to teach others to be nicer about his disability," said Kerrienne McGrath, Colton's mother.

Videotaped at their home with the family's camcorder, Colton is interviewed by his longtime friend, Julia Coombs, about what his condition is and what affect it has had on him. Decked out in a Patriots jersey and sweatpants, Colton seems right at home in front of the camera, and isn't shy about talking to his classmates about his condition.

"I get asked a lot of questions," said Colton, who enjoys playing X-Box, baseball and Texas Hold'Em. "People would ask me if I would have cerebral palsy my whole life and I said yes."

Colton has had cerebral palsy from birth. A very large baby, he became lodged in the birth canal and suffered hemorrhaging to his brain as a result of the trauma from being delivered. He was diagnosed at six months old, and spent the first few years of his life undergoing occupational, physical, swimming and speech therapy.

"Right when he was born it was touch and go," said Kerrienne, a registered nurse who now works as an interior decorator. "He was born deceased and had to be resuscitated right before my eyes."

Because of the cerebral palsy, the muscles in Colton's body are either too loose or too tense. He has a speech impediment and walks with a slight gait. For the first few years of his life, he was on a liquid diet, since he didn't have the jaw strength to chew food. In his short nine years, he has learned to use a wheelchair, a walker, and leg casts.

Kerrienne used to give him electrical stimulation therapy at night, where leads would be hooked up to his body at certain locations. The leads would send electrical impulses to his muscles to strengthen them. Because of his condition, he has seizures from time to time, which he has to take medication for. When he was younger, there were times when he would have seizures every day.

"He's been through so many things to get him to where he is," said Kerrienne. "It's a constant battle."

The difficulties with his muscles prevent Colton from taking part in town sports, but thanks to the Challenger Baseball League in Braintree, he's able to play all he wants. Geared towards children with disabilities, games are played without keeping score, which encourages the team to have fun and not worry about competing with each other. Games are only a few innings long, since some of the players tire quickly.

"If you go to one of the games it brings tears to your eyes," said Kerrienne.

Colton's video was made to be more than just an educational tool. His condition has made him the target of bullies, but since the film made its debut in Colton's third-grade class at Woodsdale Elementary School, his detractors have become his friends. On one occasion, one of the students who used to pick on Colton apologized for his unkind remarks.

"He asked if we were friends," said Colton. "I said yes, and we shook hands."

The video has been shown three times, and will likely be expanding beyond the halls of Woodsdale. Principals Marilyn Weber at Center Elementary School and Ann Harper of the Early Childhood Center have both expressed interest in obtaining a copy. Meghan Roberts, Colton's teacher, said the video helped spark discussion.

"After the video they asked more questions," said Roberts. "It's been a great opportunity for him (Colton) to get across who he is."

Though the physical affects of the disease will be with Colton for the rest of his life, his



Colton McGrath of Abington recently completed a short film detailing his condition, cerebral palsy. (Staff photo by Chris Bernstein)

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mind is as sharp as any 9-year old's. He attends the same classes as the other students at Woodsdale, said Roberts, and does just as well as the other students.






Sheri Stephenson, a therapist from the North River Collaborative, works with Colton on his coordination and motor skills at the school. She helps Colton access the curriculum by using adaptive devices such as a computer, since the muscles in Colton's hands are too weak for him to write more than a paragraph. Weighted pencils and rubber desk surfaces are other devices she uses to help Colton keep up with his lessons.

"It's not me working with him, it's him," said Stephenson. "It's him taking the chances."

Stephenson has been working with Colton since he was 4 years old and is astounded by how hard he tries to overcome the challenges put before him. She also works at Jordan Hospital with younger children with conditions similar to Colton's, so she knows what he has dealt with.

"The more I see him, the more I realize he's beaten so many odds," said Stephenson. "He doesn't let anything hold him back."

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