

Your LIFE

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TRENDS & TECH ■ HEALTH ■ FOOD ■ THE WEEKEND ■ MOVIES & MORE ■ GO FOR IT ■ PEOPLE

THE SUNDAY PROFILE: STUDENT TRIBUTE WINNER MEGAN THREATS SPIRIT OF GIVING



PRESS PHOTO/T.J. HAMILTON

Take-charge attitude: Megan Threats, 17, works at the carousel at the Van Andel Museum Center, and the rest of her life is a busy whirl of volunteering, leadership and fundraising. "Young people should get involved," she says. "Eventually this will be our city, in our hands."

BY TERRI FINCH HAMILTON
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

When Megan Threats was in third grade, she came home from school nearly every day without her winter gloves.

Her family was poor. It drove her mother crazy.

"I had to keep buying her new ones, and we couldn't afford it," her mom, Rene Threats, recalls. "I tried those mitten clips. I tried pinning them to her coat. Finally I got angry. I said, 'Megan, you've got to be more responsible. This can't go on. We can't afford to keep buying you gloves.'"

Megan started to cry. She didn't lose all those gloves, she told her mom. She gave them to kids who didn't have any.

"She said that as long as I kept giving her new ones, she thought it was OK to give hers away," Threats says.

Her eyes fill with tears as she tells about it.

"Here she was, getting in trouble for losing her gloves," Threats says. "I didn't know."

She didn't know the other day, either, when Megan, now 17, paid for a

Creston High School classmate's Homecoming dance ticket because she didn't have the money.

So when Megan's dad, Louis, sits at the family's kitchen table and says how he always hoped his daughter would be giving, it's as if a family prophecy has been fulfilled.

Megan, a senior at Creston, works
SEE THREATS, J2

Paying 'Tribute'

The list of inspiring, accomplished women gets a bit longer at noon Thursday when the YWCA of Grand Rapids honors six outstanding local women and a remarkable student at its annual Tribute Awards.

Hundreds will pack the Ambassador Ballroom in the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel to hear how this year's honorees have made life better in our community.

Tribute is the YWCA's biggest fundraising event of the year. Last year, it raised more than \$60,000 for YWCA programs, including the Domestic Crisis Center, sexual assault programs, child sexual abuse treatment services, child care and health programs.

The event is sold out, but a waiting list is available. Call Francesca at 459-7062, ext. 532.

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“It felt like that was the kind of thing I was supposed to be doing. Like it was just part of me. If I didn't do this stuff, it would feel so weird. Like it wasn't me.”

Student volunteer Megan Threats

SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS

'By giving them the tools, they're able to give back'

MARIA DEL CARMEN CRUZ

Occupation: Founder of Programa de Apoyo a Nuestra (PANC — Helping Our Communities)

No one has to explain to Maria Del Carmen Cruz why a 20-year-old Hispanic woman would wait until she was seven months pregnant and anemic before seeking prenatal care.

Twenty-five years ago, Cruz was that young woman. What she has learned since then has become her passion to share in a culturally friendly way.

"When you learn things and know other women need to know those things, you want to help," she says.

In 2000, she developed the Programa de Apoyo a Nuestra (PANC — Helping Our Communities) for Spectrum Health. By 2003, it had won the Michigan Hospital Association's Community Excellence Award.

Cruz knows more than how to create programs, she knows

how to offer help. She often runs up against cultural barriers, for example traditions that tell women to be submissive to their husbands. So Cruz approaches the whole family with her suggestions.

"She's good at moving around that," says Mary Kay Kempker-Van Driel, director of Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities initiative. She describes Cruz as "gracious and tenacious. She doesn't let go of the issue until you get it."

Since many people from poorer countries view health care as an expensive luxury to be used only in life-threatening emergencies, it's important to teach preventive health care, Cruz says. Cruz and her five coworkers set up case management for new families.

PANC also hosts educational workshops on topics such as taxes and public transportation, HIV patient and family support, and has its own youth program aimed at stemming violence.

"We see youth as our future. The Hispanic community is growing by birth, not by people

moving here," she says. "Really, they are our future, and we're trying to change some habits."

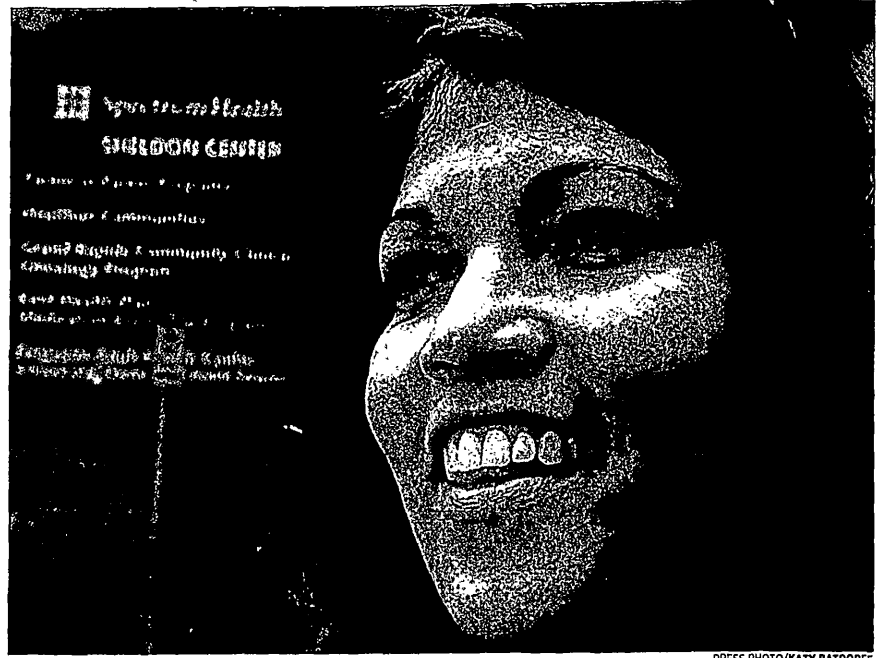
Cruz moved from Chicago to Grand Rapids twice, but the second time, in 1992, she stayed.

"I decided I wanted to do more. I wanted better for my kids," she says. She is divorced; her oldest child, who is 25, made her a proud grandmother. Her youngest is 14.

PANC helps about 200 families a year. They come from Honduras, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina and Mexico. Some are from Cruz's first home, Puerto Rico. Others are born in the United States but unfamiliar with aspects of society outside their communities.

Wherever they come from, "they're not asking for a handout, just the help they need. They want to give back to the community more than they take," Cruz says. "By giving them the tools, they're able to give back."

— Juanita Westaby



Speaking up: Maria Del Carmen Cruz created a program for Spectrum Health's Healthier Communities initiative. Her experiences drove her to educate people about preventive care.

PRESS PHOTO/KATY BATOORFF

ARTS

'Teaching is a wonderful way to spend your life'



PRESS PHOTO/ANNA MOORE BUTZNER

Solving mysteries: Deanna Morse, a film professor at Grand Valley State University, broke into animation when the skills were not widely taught.

DEANNA MORSE

Occupation: Professor, filmmaker

It all started with the Pillsbury Doughboy. Deanna Morse was an undergrad at Iowa State University studying art. She took a film class on a lark and was assigned to analyze a TV ad featuring the plump, ticklish, iconic puppet. Proving inspiration can come from odd places, the clip exposed her to a world of mystery she wanted to solve.

"I didn't know how he moved, and I had to figure it out," she says. "I was hooked by the magic of it. I found it compelling, creating a character that takes on a life of its own."

Morse's burgeoning interest in animation came with a roadblock, however.

When she was in college, in the late '60s and early '70s, it was a secretive industry. Animators were like magicians — they didn't divulge their techniques.

"It was as if you needed a Disney studio to do it, and it wasn't for individual people," says Morse, 55. "That's why I got involved in community media — it empowers people

to make statements.

"I'm interested in demystifying the process," she adds.

So it makes sense her career path would lead to teaching.

After working in film and television, she taught media courses in Denver before landing at William James College, part of Grand Valley State Colleges (the institution's name before gaining university status). She became a communications professor in 1984 and since has taught film and video classes, including animation, history and production.

Morse's animated creations are remarkable, especially considering she is self-taught. Her body of work includes more than 30 short films, some of which were aired on "Sesame Street." Another, titled "Charleston Home Movie," is on permanent display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Her work was compiled on a DVD, "Move. Click. Move." in 2001; she sold the first 1,000 copies and has since re-pressed the disc, with all proceeds benefiting GVSU's Dirk Koning Scholarship Fund.

Her experiences led her to judge seats at various film

competitions. She has traveled to Japan, Croatia and Russia for the world's biggest animation festivals, often as the only American judge.

In August, she sat on the jury for the Seoul International Cartoon and Animation Festival in Korea, which drew 500,000 attendees. Sometimes, she screens up to 300 short films at a single event.

"It really is a privileged chair to have," she says. "Screening other people's work is inspiration for my own work."

More so, Morse's enthusiasm and motivation are rooted in teaching.

She has seen students achieve remarkable professional feats — one, Greg Colton, is directing episodes of Fox's hit show "Family Guy."

She is on sabbatical for a year so she can concentrate on creating more films, find new technical and conceptual challenges to tackle and submerge herself in the methodical nature of the work.

But she might not have the drive to do so without her students.

"Teaching is a wonderful way to spend your life," she says. "It's always inspiring to be working with students."

— John Serba

ADVOCACY

'We're a construction company, a mortgage company, a social service agency'

THE REV. PAM DOTY-NATION

Occupation: Executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Kent County

The Rev. Pam Doty-Nation was 900 miles from Covington, La., on Oct. 11.

Still, she heard the sounds of President Bush pounding a hammer at a Habitat for Humanity job site reverberating all the way to Grand Rapids.

"It's going to be a huge challenge rebuilding the Gulf Coast, and I think Bush's visit helps people know more about Habitat and what kind of work it does all over the world," says Doty-Nation, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Kent County.

Bush was at the Habitat site north of New Orleans to help the nonprofit organization build houses for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Bush spent most of his time chatting, signing autographs and posing for pictures.

Doty-Nation doesn't have that luxury — not when the

local affiliate is trying to erect its 200th house before the snow flies.

Six years ago, Doty-Nation set a goal of having 200 Habitat homes built by December 2005. Work on this landmark home, 821 Dorchester Ave. SW, began in September.

The goal, called "audacious" when she set it, could not have happened without legions of volunteers. True, too, of the YWCA's Tribute Award.

"It's a huge honor, and I think about what has happened the last several years to move us forward," says Doty-Nation, who joined Habitat in 1999.

"There are so many people who have been supportive, and it has come together through their efforts, especially in terms of advocacy and the visions that keep us moving forward."

As executive director, Doty-Nation wears many hats.

"We're a construction company, a mortgage company and a social service agency," she says.

The Kent County chapter is one of 85 Habitat affiliates in Michigan and the state's largest, erecting between 20

and 25 houses a year for low-income families.

Recipients are required to contribute 300 to 500 hours of sweat equity on their houses.

Hurricane Katrina evacuees who have settled in West Michigan eventually may find themselves in Habitat homes.

"We are reaching out to them and encouraging them to apply," she says.

She is one of 12 executive directors, recommending policy to Habitat International as it relates to 2,000 affiliates.

Before joining Habitat, she was director of transitional housing for Dwelling Place of Grand Rapids Inc.

Doty-Nation, 51, is also an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ.

She graduated from Western Theological Seminary with a master's of divinity in 1988 and was ordained in 1991.

And, yes, she gets dirty just like the volunteers working on Habitat homes.

"I miss the nail head more often than I hit it, but I am getting better," she says, laughing. "I can actually drive a nail straight."

— John Hogan



Home builder: The Rev. Pam Doty-Nation, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Kent County, is close to reaching a goal she set six years ago: 200 local Habitat homes built by December 2005.

PRESS PHOTO/ANNA MOORE BUTZNER

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Helping women find (their voices) has given meaning to my life'

TWINK FREY

Occupation: Nokomis Foundation founder

Twink Frey has been surrounded by really big projects and really big money, but she picks a small, simple act to illustrate the power of philanthropy.

Shortly after she founded the Nokomis Foundation in 1990 to fund projects that help women and girls, the foundation was approached by a Quaker organization concerned women in Michigan prisons didn't know about their basic health rights.

"We gave them maybe \$3,000," Frey says. "That's all it took to print up a simple piece of paper to let women know they have rights, that they can get a Pap smear."

"It's incredible what a small amount of money can do."

While the grants her foundation awards are sometimes small, the ideas Frey hatches typically are big.

She saw actor Gene Wilder interviewed on TV a few years ago about a new place he was starting called Gilda's Club, in honor of his late wife, Gilda Radner, who died of cancer. Frey, a breast cancer survivor,

decided Grand Rapids needed one of these support communities for people with cancer.

The next day, she was in line at the grocery store behind a local hospital president. It was the first of 100 personal contacts she made to launch a club here. Frey went on to co-found Gilda's Club Grand Rapids, now the biggest and busiest of North America's 20 clubs.

When she couldn't find the information she needed at the local library to write a paper on the contributions of Grand Rapids women through history, she started the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council in 1987, a group dedicated to preserving and celebrating the accomplishments of local women.

In what she calls her most important contribution, Frey, 67, founded the Nokomis Foundation to award grants and fund initiatives for girls and women nationwide. Since 1991, Nokomis has provided more than \$6 million in grants and program funding, most of it in the Grand Rapids area.

It has funded a staggering array of projects, from the pioneering nurse examiner

program for sexual assault victims at the Grand Rapids YWCA to a program that helps local women in jail turn their lives around.

One of the foundation's finest projects, Frey says, was an 18-month study of prostitution in Grand Rapids. Frey says it changed the way people view prostitutes.

"These are real women with real faces," she says. "And real families they're trying to support. It's not about sex — it's about making a living. I think people know that now."

The only daughter of prominent Grand Rapids civic leaders Edward and Frances Frey was named Mary Caroline, but her childhood nickname stuck.

She spent 25 years as an elementary school and early childhood teacher, then struggled to decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

"Growing up, my family didn't encourage women," she says. "I never felt like I had a voice. Finding my own voice and helping other women find theirs has given great meaning to my life."

Frey and her husband, Jim McKay, set up an endowment fund at Aquinas College that



Special gifts: Twink Frey, founder of the Nokomis Foundation, stands in the foundation's lobby with a woven wool totem pole made for the building by a local female artist.

started the Jane Hibbard Idema Women's Studies Center. She felt just as passionate last year when she heard about a group of African American women

struggling to publish a calendar to educate women of color about breast cancer.

When Frey heard the women were at the printer

\$4,000 short to pay the bill, she sent over a check.

"My heart leads me," she says.

— Terri Finch Hamilton

PROFESSIONS

'I have graduates all over the U.S. now, which is neat'



Pioneer: Dr. Gwendolyn L. Hoffman was the first graduate of the emergency medicine residency program at Butterworth. She then directed the program for 21 years.

DR. GWENDOLYN L. HOFFMAN

Occupation: Physician

Dr. Gwendolyn L. Hoffman has been a physician for more than 25 years. And she still works every other weekend and every other holiday.

"That's why I've had a boring life," she says with a smile and a shrug. "All I do is work."

"Hardly boring. She's saved lives, diagnosed diseases, stitched countless wounds and, more times than she'd prefer to remember, delivered the worst news to anxious families."

Hoffman, 62, has been a doctor in the emergency departments at Spectrum Hospital's Butterworth and Blodgett campuses since she started her residency in 1977.

She was the first graduate of the emergency medicine residency at Butterworth, which was created as a result of her persuading local doctors to treat emergency medicine as a separate specialty, just like obstetrics or surgery.

Each year, the program

includes about 30 residents, making it one of the largest of its kind in the country, Hoffman says.

A year after finishing her emergency medicine residency, she became the program director, a position she held for 21 years.

"I have graduates all over the U.S. now, which is kind of neat," says Hoffman, a lifelong single woman who lives in Twin Lake, north of Muskegon.

After graduating from Muskegon High School, Hoffman received a full scholarship to the University of Michigan, where she studied nursing.

She graduated with honors in 1965 and began working as a registered nurse.

In 1972, she decided to go to medical school and was accepted at the College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University.

"I never borrowed any money or had grants," she says. "I worked as a nurse all the way through medical school."

Emergency medicine was attractive because of its unpredictability. "You never know what's going to walk

through that door," she says.

Despite the crummy hours, the potential exposure to communicable diseases and the danger — she once was kicked and knocked down by a patient — she continues to practice hands-on emergency medicine. Only about 25 percent of emergency care doctors are women.

"But what other thing could I do where I'd have the ability to see so many different things, and so many different aspects of medicine all in one day?" she says.

Hoffman also served nine years on the American Board of Emergency Medicine, helping to draft written and oral exams for certification as an emergency department specialist.

And her physician peers at Spectrum chose her as president of the medical staff in 2002 and 2003.

"She is a woman who has not only shown vision and leadership, but who has risen to the very pinnacle of her profession, both locally and on a national level," says her colleague, Dr. Bryant Pierce.

— Beth Loechler

BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT, INDUSTRY AND LABOR

'When the door closes, pry it open'

LINDA LAFONTSEE

Occupation: Art gallery co-owner

Linda LaFontsee has nurtured artists. She has supported causes that help the sick, the young and the disenfranchised. She and her husband, Scott, turned an out-of-the-way frame shop into a thriving gallery, becoming pioneers in the resurgence of the North Monroe section of downtown Grand Rapids.

Yet, LaFontsee produced no art for 12 years.

"I had a lot of fear involved with making art. Being an artist is very exposing," says LaFontsee, nestled in a leather club chair at her 820 Monroe Ave. NW gallery, surrounded by paintings and books about art. "You put yourself out there, and you set yourself up for acceptance, rejection, criticism. And I was unprepared for that."

Five years ago, LaFontsee, who studied interior design and fine arts at Kendall College, once again took up her artist's brush, working in acrylics, oils and encaustic, an ancient medium using beeswax

and a blow torch. She currently has a solo show at a Grosse Pointe gallery.

"Linda is inspirational to me," says community activist Twink Frey, who nominated LaFontsee. "She's such a humble person. People have no idea what she does beyond her business."

When LaFontsee came to Grand Rapids from Battle Creek to attend college, she had never even stepped inside an art museum.

"I didn't have any exposure to art at all, except the Encyclopaedia Britannica," she says. "I would go to the art section there and devour that."

"(Art) is an expression of a feeling, of emotion, of the soul. It can evoke emotion, and I love that it can do that."

LaFontsee and her husband met at the Gaia coffee shop, then she worked for him at his tiny Grand Street frame shop, Underground Studio, which catered to artists and fine art photographers.

The frame shop had one 3-foot wall that could accommodate one or two pieces of art at a time. That was the extent of the gallery until 1991, when they moved

the shop into the North Monroe district.

"We were meeting more artists and building relationships with them, and most of them did not have a place to show their work. It just felt like a real natural move for us."

Today, the colorful gallery, sporting worn wood floors and big windows with a Grand River view, houses dozens of paintings and posters, a first-floor gift shop, a book section and the frame shop. LaFontsee concentrates on art while her husband, whose background includes fine art photography, handles business details. They employ 11 people, mostly artists.

LaFontsee works with interior designers and homeowners to choose artwork for their spaces. She has a long list of clients from the corporate, medical, public and nonprofit fields. "I do a lot of consulting," she says.

With donations and discounts on art, gift packages, framing and supplies, LaFontsee supports several charities important to her, including Very Special Arts, Gilda's Club, YWCA's Run



Opening doors: Linda LaFontsee, co-owner of LaFontsee Galleries, donates some of her business revenue and supplies to local charities and mentors artists.

Jane Run and many others.

About five years ago, LaFontsee, 47, and a group of friends took up running, with the goal of competing in the Chicago Marathon. Earlier this month, she ran in the marathon for the fifth time. She sees similarities between running a business and training.

"You have good runs and good days, you have really

hard runs, you have really hard days," LaFontsee says.

"But you have to keep thinking about the goal, what we're training for, the end result. Whenever it gets difficult here at work, when we have huge challenges, we just keep thinking about, why are we in it? Why are we doing it?"

"Don't give up. Keep focused. Be stubborn, be bull-

headed, keep going for it, and when the door closes, just pry it open. Don't do it unless you have a lot of passion. When you feel the most fear, that's when the door feels closed. Most often, for me at least, it's my own door.

"The most growth happens when you push through those doors."

— Elizabeth Slowik

THREATS

HER RESUME ALREADY IS 95 ITEMS LONG

CONTINUED FROM J1
at the carousel at the Van Andel Museum Center on Saturdays. The painted carousel horses spin in a dizzying whirl behind her, in what could be a metaphor for her busy life.

The teen's resume already lists an astonishing 95 things, from volunteer work to awards to leadership positions she's held.

Class president. Member of the Mayor's Youth Council. Peer listener. Mentor to fourth- and fifth-graders. Philanthropist. Singer. Blood-drive volunteer. Student against Drunk Driving member.

The list goes on. And on. "I don't like sitting still and being bored," Megan says with a shrug.

Her older sister, Precious, a junior at Michigan State University, says their family doesn't have much money.

"But nobody ever knew it," she says. "I think it's all in the way you carry yourself."

Megan carries herself like an attorney. It's what she wants to be someday.

She strides through the Creston High School library in a business suit, her arm outstretched to shake your hand. She dresses up every day.

"Even when I was little and played dress-up, I never wanted to take off the dress-up clothes," she says.

Everybody in school knows her and seems to like her.

"There's no dirt," says Creston counselor Gwen Dawkins. "None."

Except in her bedroom, and that's more like clutter, really. Clothes, books, church bulletins and silver high heels are in a jumble on the floor, but there's a small path that gets you from the dresser to the bed.

Megan's addiction to community service started in middle school when she worked at the Jump Rope for Heart fundraiser for the American Heart Association. Then, it was on to student council, where she was vice president and got her first taste of leadership. She tromped through her inner-city neighborhood picking up trash.

"It felt like that was the kind of thing I was supposed to be doing," she says. "Like it was just part of me."

Before long, her calendar was stuffed, as she volunteered at holiday dinners for homeless people, joined the Business Professionals of America, taught summer day camp, worked for Habitat for Humanity and started giving monthly donations to The Salvation Army.

"If I didn't do this stuff, it would feel so weird," Megan says. "Like it wasn't me."

Parental influence

She was raised to do this sort of thing, she says.

Rene Threats, 43, who works in the office at Renaissance Church of God in Christ, where the family attends, took her kids along when she volunteered in the community. She was always in her children's classrooms, helping out.

Megan's father, Louis, 52, a welder at Irwin Seating, often would pop in at Megan's school.

"He'd just come and hang out," she says. "He'd take off



PRESS PHOTO/T.J. HAMILTON

Proud moment: After she was crowned Creston High School Homecoming queen, Megan's dad, Louis, said, "I wanted to go up and hug her, but they wouldn't let me. I was so overjoyed. It seems like she was just my baby, now she's all grown up."

work to do that."

Her parents were block captains on Giddings Avenue SE, where the family lived for most of Megan's childhood. They now live in Northeast Grand Rapids, near Creston. They led neighborhood clean-ups, planted flower seeds, organized crime watches. They won an award from the Grand Rapids Police Department for most improved neighborhood.

Rene always signed her three kids up for the public library's summer reading club, and they'd walk to the library, often leading a parade of other neighborhood kids. They had to write book reports throughout the summer.

Megan grew up hearing from her parents that she should be a leader, not a follower.

"I told all of them, you are to be an example," Rene says, "a shining light. A representative not just of our family, but of Christ."

"There was never a pressure that she should do this, this and this," Rene says. "But she definitely heard from us that she is capable of this, this and this."

"They always told me that nothing is impossible," Megan says. "And I believed it."

She's applying to Michigan State University, University of Michigan, Cornell, Harvard and Purdue.

"If I get accepted to all of them, I'll go wherever they give me the most money," she says.

"Megan lives her life with a plan," says Renee Davis, Megan's godmother. "She goes right down the list. She doesn't



PRESS PHOTO/NOEL WEBLEY II

Good influences: Megan with her parents, Rene and Louis. "To see why she turned out the way she did, just look at her mom and dad," Creston High counselor Gwen Dawkins says.

say if this happens in my life, but when she talks things into existence."

She knows things don't always work out. Her older brother, Louis, 24, attended Grand Valley State University on a scholarship, but lost the funding when his grades slipped. He's working at a store in town and trying to figure out his future.

Meanwhile, Megan spends many lunch periods in the school library, scouring books for more scholarship opportunities. She keeps a separate calendar listing application deadlines.

Queen for a weekend

At a Homecoming assembly in the packed Creston High au-

ditorium, students wait with anticipation as out in the hall, the Homecoming court lines up for their grand entrance, dressed in shimmering gowns and teetering heels.

Megan is all in silver, from her high heels to her sparkly tiara. Emcees list hobbies for each member of the court as they descend the auditorium stairs in the spotlight.

While some girls listed "talking on the phone" and "shopping for shoes," Megan's hobbies were "volunteering in the community" and "mentoring inner-city kids."

That night, as the Houseman Field crowd roars, Megan is crowned Homecoming Queen.

Her parents beam. And out of the stands comes her older brother, Louis, who she hasn't seen in a few months.

They hold onto each other and cry.

On paper, this is a serious young woman, who donates money to several charities and has spoken with politicians on C-Span during a class trip to Washington, D.C.

But she allows her inner princess to come out for a night.

"The crown I get to wear is huge," Megan says with a grin. The big dance the next night will be her first real date.

"She's as pretty on the inside as she is on the outside," says Creston counselor Dawkins, as she, Megan and others decorate the cafeteria before the dance.

"There are all kinds of people in this senior class, and they all overwhelmingly voted Megan for queen," Dawkins says. "I helped count the votes, and it was Megan, Megan, Megan, Megan, Megan, Megan, Megan. All the girls in school knew exactly who was going to be



Staying in the lines: Megan, age 4, coloring with her mom, Rene.

queen. "She knows what she wants, and she's going after it," Dawkins says. "She'll go far. You watch."

People take notice

Over at the YWCA, they're watching. YWCA Executive Director Carla Blinkhorn was astounded by Megan's resume. "She's a leader, she's a volunteer, and she's a donor," Blinkhorn says. "She obviously has a broad interest in her community."

The YWCA added the student category to its Tribute in 1992. This year, they added a \$1,000 leadership award from the YWCA board of directors, named after longtime YWCA supporter Judy Lloyd, who died in June.

"For years, we had been awarding women only after they've had decades of accomplishment," Blinkhorn says. "We decided we wanted to encourage decades of accomplishment."

Megan's older sister, Precious, won this same Tribute student award in 2002. She's studying pre-dentistry at Michigan State University while working three jobs. The sisters talk on the phone every night before bed. Precious sheds some light on her sister's devotion to all those causes.

"She knows doing all these things will make her more competitive to get into good colleges, to get the scholarships she needs to pay for college," Precious says. "She's serious about life. Sometimes I have to tell her to go out, have fun. This is her senior year."

She proudly tells how everybody likes her little sister, how she earns others' respect.

"Megan treats everybody the same, whether they're popular or not, whether they raise hell or are invisible," Precious says. "She treats everybody the way they want to be treated."

Megan helped start the Peer Listening Program at Creston, where students are trained to listen to others' concerns.

"There are so many things kids are dealing with," Megan says. "Teen pregnancy, peer pressure, rumors. Kids can say really mean things."

"Kids get stressed out sometimes and feel they can't deal with it," she says. "I talk to my mom about everything, but a lot of kids don't have that."

When she was 8, Megan asked her dad if she could be president of the United States someday.

"He told me yes, I could," she smiles. "I'm holding him to it."

E-mail: thamilton@grpress.com



PRESS PHOTO/LORI NIEDENFUER COOL

Her golden ticket: During her lunch hour, Megan talks to school counselor Gwen Dawkins about scholarships. "Doing well is my way to get to college," she says.