

Daily Breeze

THURSDAY April 19, 2007

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'SHE'S BEEN AN INSPIRATION'



Elena Hodges, center, who was born with a condition that affects the cornea, takes a morning break at American Martyrs Catholic School in Manhattan Beach. The fun-loving 10-year-old will participate in the Junior Blind Olympics on Saturday.

Torrance 10-year-old tackles the Junior Blind Olympics

By Rachel Jones, STAFF WRITER | Photos by Sean Hiller, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elena Hodges has a busy day planned for Saturday. There's the relay race, a game of Goal Ball and undoubtedly other athletic events. They are all part of the third annual Junior Blind Olympics in Los Angeles.

Elena, 10, has been visually impaired her whole life and, according to those close to her, also has been an inspiration.

The Torrance resident was born with congenital hereditary endothelial dystrophy, a condition that affects the cornea. Elena had a successful corneal transplant at age 2 that allowed her to see until she was about 6, said her mother, Lorraine Hodges.

"When she had the corneal transplant she almost had perfect vision, and then it rejected and it just went cloudy," Hodges recalled. Since it rejected, Elena has had four more unsuccessful transplants in the last four years.

Elena has been involved with Junior Blind of America for much of that time. The organization's programs are designed to help blind or visually impaired youths develop independence and self-esteem by providing education, recreation, training and rehabilitation.

During the summer, Elena attends Camp Bloomfield, in the mountains of Malibu, that includes outdoor games, sports and other activities. "If she could stay all summer she'd be so happy," said her mother.

Elena also loves participating in the Junior Blind Olympics each spring. The event, co-sponsored by the Optimist Blind Youth Association and held on the Junior Blind campus in Windsor Hills, brings in visually impaired children from around the country.

Participants compete in a variety of activities including archery, rowing, shot put, soccer throw, aquatics, high jump, long jump and running. The sports are all adapted for visually impaired players.

Elena can't participate in everyday sports, her mother said, but she wants to do all the events at the Olympics and still has a competitive nature.



"She just wants to be part of everything," says Elena's Braille teacher, Lisa Sawkar, of her enthusiastic pupil.

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Elena, second from right, plays on the school yard with her friends at her side.

— Want to go? —

■ **The Junior Blind Olympics:** 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Junior Blind of America campus, 5300 Angeles Vista Blvd., Los Angeles.

— Find out more —

■ **Information:** For more on the event or to get involved with Junior Blind of America, call 323-295-4555 or go to www.juniorblind.org.

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OLYMPICS

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"Because she's visually impaired, it seems like she's getting left behind when the other kids go do soccer and basketball ... So she really loves being a part of the special Olympics," Hodges said.

Elena's shyness prevented her from commenting for this story. But her mother says the girl loves participating in races as well as Goal Ball, a three-on-three match in which participants on their knees try to stop a ball that has a bell inside it.

Participating in Junior Blind of America activities has made Elena more confident, her mother said.

"She's competing and she's getting medals, where she never got to do that before," she said. "And she just gets this sense of fulfillment knowing she competed and was a winner like the other kids."

Her success is carrying over into her school life.

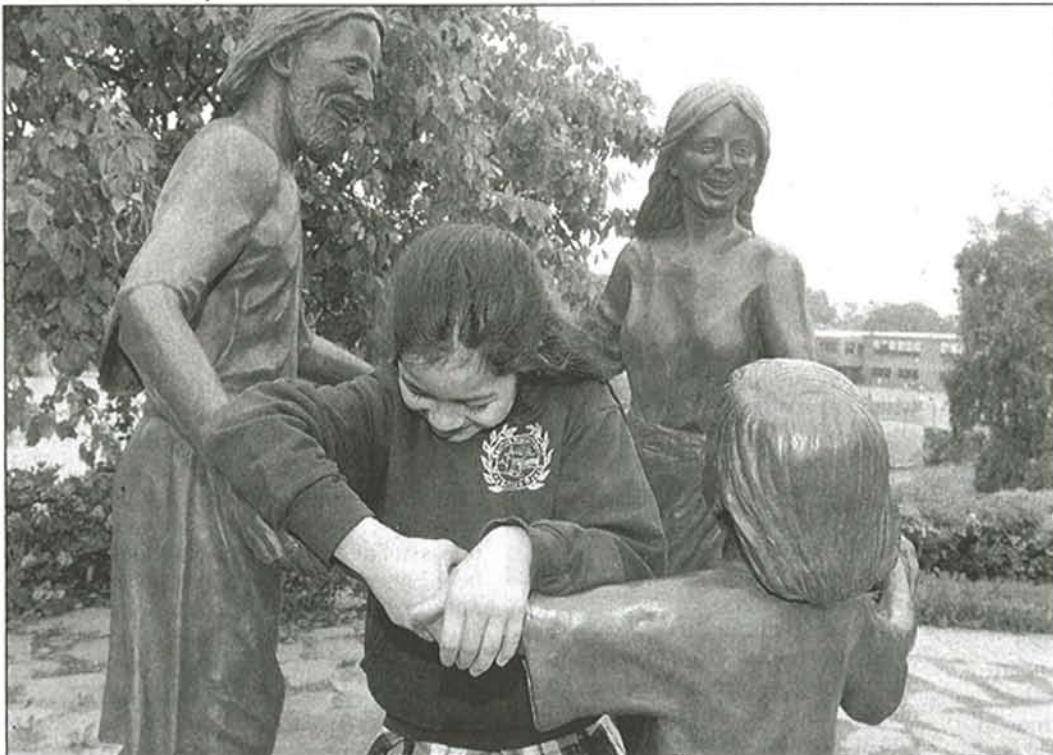
Elena attended American Martyrs Catholic School in Manhattan Beach until her first corneal transplant rejected, after which she switched to a Los Angeles County public school to learn Braille.

"When you have a special needs child you can't go to a private school," her mother said. "So she was separated from her brother and sister for two years and really not thriving socially."

An anonymous donor paid for Elena to return to classes at American Martyr.

"She went back for second grade and just thrived," Hodges said proudly. "She does everything the other kids do."

Elena does all of her work in Braille and, says her mother, no



SEAN HILLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elena Hodges maneuvers around a statue to catch up with her friends during a school recess.

“

**She's competing and she's getting medals,
where she never got to do that before.**

”

— LORRAINE HODGES, mother of Elena, who is visually impaired

one treats her differently. Elena's Braille teacher, Lisa Sawkar, works with her at school to ensure she has all the class work in Braille.

"When I'm there I just work with her, making sure she understands Braille or the lesson that's being taught," Sawkar explained. "The biggest part of my job is math because it's so

different when you do it in Braille."

Sawkar, who has known Elena since 2003, described her pupil as an "eager, enthusiastic kid that just wants to take it all in," adding that Elena has a strong sense of self and has come out of her shell more since leaving the Los Angeles County school system.

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"She just wants to be a part of everything and, in relation to her visual impairment, wants to keep up with everybody," Sawkar said.

On March 24, American Martyrs School had a fundraiser called the BNICE Benefit that attracted more than 200 people and raised more than \$60,000 so that other disabled children could attend the school.

"She's been an inspiration," Lorraine Hodges said.

In addition to the American Martyrs donor, Hodges said the community has made a big difference in helping Elena. "Manhattan Beach has just embraced her with love and compassion," she said.

Because Elena's visual impairment is still so new, Hodges said the whole family is involved in her care.

Elena's siblings, Lucas, 11, and Grace, 5, help her at school, guiding her to class. "They real-

ly learn a lot of compassion. Instead of being angry about it, they learn the opposite," their mother said.

Sawkar said Lorraine has been a great advocate for her daughter. She recommends that parents of visually impaired youths get involved in their children's education and speak out about what's best for their child.

"Speak up and work the system," she said.

Hodges sees the changes in Elena's sight as a journey, one that was sometimes difficult and took enormous hope and faith.

"I've realized that whether she can see or not it doesn't matter," she said. "She's going to have the most wonderful life."

Lorraine said she used to worry, but now knows that Elena's impairment won't stop her.

"She's a really special gift," she said. "It's challenging, but it has been a total blessing."

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