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Disability doesn't stop spirited teen

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By Caroline An



Adriana Muñoz and her 16-year-old daughter Laura Betancourt enjoy each others company at their Pasadena home Friday, April 25, 2008. Betancourt, who has Williams syndrome and is blind, will compete in the Junior Blind Olympics Saturday. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz/SXCITY)

PASADENA - Laura Betancourt is a typical teenager. She racks up cell phone minutes talking to friends and loves singing and donning her tap shoes.

The only difference between the 16-year-old Pasadena teen and her peers is her blindness.

Laura, an eighth-grader at John Marshall Fundamental Secondary School, suffers from Williams syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that weakened her immune system. She lost her vision eight years ago after complications from chicken pox.

Today, Laura will compete at the Junior Blind Olympics - pitting herself against hundreds of other athletes from California and across the nation in archery, rowing, soccer throw, goal ball, a 100-yard dash and the long jump.

She has competed in the Blind Olympics before, she said, but never placed in any of the categories.

Her favorite event? The 100-yard dash.

"I'm pretty fast," said Laura.

At school, Laura is accompanied by a helper, who takes notes for her in class. Her extracurricular activities include taking swimming lessons at the Glendale YMCA and attending Saturday morning piano lessons. She also sings in the Braille Institute Choir.

Her mother, Adriana Musa, said Laura was too young to recall any problems she encountered from her loss of vision.

"Laura didn't change," Musa said. "The change was more difficult for me."

Musa learned to read Braille and was inspired to work with children with disabilities, and is an aide at Loma Alta Elementary, the same school Laura attended.

"Laura was there until the sixth grade and the teachers and staff were very kind," Musa said.

Laura's medical condition has not deterred the plucky teen from leading an active and relatively self-sufficient life - at home and at school.

"I'm used to it now, but it was a little hard to adjust to at first," she said.

While she has not trained for today's competition, she is not worried. "There are people there who show us what to do," she said.