

'Unstoppable'

Man goes beyond expectations to help others overcome adversity

By Kelly Smith,
Eagle correspondent

Rob Olszewski doesn't let anything stop him. When the Gibsonia man isn't working, he's leading mission trips or doing the grocery shopping for his mother or helping those with disabilities secure housing and jobs. All this is a far cry from what doctors envisioned for Olszewski's life.

In 1974, at 13 months old, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Doctors told his parents the boy would likely never walk or talk.

Cerebral palsy is marked by the loss or impairment of motor function caused by brain damage before, during or immediately after birth, according to CerebralPalsy.org. But Olszewski never saw his disability as a reason to slow down or keep him away from something he wanted to accomplish.

"Look at this, I'm active because I can show you that even with a disability I can lead a normal life," he said recently.

Normal, for Olszewski is busy.

In addition to his job at Butler County Community College and his help at home, Olszewski is a deacon in his church, a volunteer with multiple organizations and is a network member of Uniquely The Same, a group that seeks to help those with disabilities find homes and employment.

"He has that unstoppable passion for rising above what might be a hindrance or what might be holding him back in anything," said Calvin Clark, director of operations at Uniquely The Same.

Clark says Olszewski has a "purposeful busyness."

"Rob is extraordinary in his drive to help others be better people," he said. "I think his greatest gift is that he is a mentor."

Gloria Olszewski said her son was always determined with a "can-do" attitude.

"Rob has a determination in him," she said. "He has a confidence in himself that is unbelievable."

From the time of his diagnosis, she worked with her son, getting down on the floor and moving his arms and legs to crawl.

Rob Olszewski endured 10 surgeries throughout his life and, after each surgery, they would have to start over, he said. He finally walked alone when he was 6 years old, serving as the ring bearer in his sister Cathy's wedding.

Olszewski grew up on a 42-acre farm near Saxonburg. As a child, he learned to play the organ, composed songs and rode along with his father, Robert, on the tractor.

He recalled asking his father to let him drive the large tractor and smiled when he recounted how his father finally relented after many years.

Olszewski graduated from Knoch High School in 1993 and went on to Butler County Community College, earning a drafting degree and later, a programming degree.

After several computer programming jobs with various companies, he now works at the college, running its computer lab and assisting students with engineering and digital fabrication.



Rob Olszewski, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and endured 10 surgeries throughout his life, is a network member of Uniquely The Same, a group that seeks to help those with disabilities. DAVE PRELOSKY/ BUTLER EAGLE

Flipping through a binder last week, Olszewski talked about awards he has received, from a 2010 Lifesteps Star Award to being named a distinguished alumni at BC3 in 2012. Because of his alumni award, Olszewski was selected to speak at the college's 2013 commencement ceremony.

"So, that's a big honor," he said.

On one of the pages in his binder, Olszewski pasted a 2010 West Virginia newspaper article about his talk to a disability support group at a local church.

"I thought, 'Why can't we do a disability ministry here?'" Olszewski recalls thinking at the time.

He worked with the Rev. Nick Protos at his home church, Gospel Fellowship Presbyterian Church, 161 McFann Road, Valencia, to start a Special Needs Ministry.

"The Special Needs Ministry at my church comes alongside other ministries of the church to assist in engaging people with special needs and their families in the life of the church," Olszewski said.

In 2014, while speaking at a conference in Pittsburgh, Olszewski met Clark, a minister who was "planting" a restoration church in the South Hills. Clark, who is not disabled, became an advocate for the disabled after meeting a man with a "significant disability" while in seminary.

Clark and Olszewski began talking about ways to help those with disabilities and Uniquely The Same "flowed out of that," Clark said.

The organization seeks to help those with special needs in five areas: employment, housing, transportation, education and medical services.

"There are real struggles in the world related to disabilities," Clark said. "When we think of people with a disability, we don't really think in terms of 'us' and 'them.' We just sort of think of 'us.' You realize people are people."

Gloria Olszewski said her life with her son has come full circle.

"Growing up, his hand was always in mine for support, now my hand is in his for support," she said.

She said God had a plan for Rob.

"God is good to me because he gave me Rob. I'm so grateful that I do have him," she said.