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Wekiva High valedictorian's life a victory over disability

By [Joseph Freeman](#), Orlando Sentinel

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The valedictorian at Wekiva High School near Apopka succeeded in 14 Advanced Placement courses, but she lacks the strength to operate a stapler. She earned a grade-point average of 5.1, but whenever she started a new class, she had to ask another student to help her take books out of her backpack.

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Audrey Winkelsas' life has been full of such difficult contrasts. Yet when she emerged from behind the stage in a wheelchair to raucous applause and a standing ovation during graduation ceremonies Friday, she finally had a moment to focus only on the victories. In her small, frail hands, she held a copy of her valedictory speech.

Winkelsas, 18, has spinal muscular atrophy, or SMA, a disease in which the body's muscles degenerate. Although her affliction is crippling and incurable, she is a dazzling student who has received a full scholarship at the University of Miami, where she plans to study the disease that has dominated her life.

SMA is debilitating because it curbs movement and weakens the muscles so much that even coughing and clearing the throat are painstaking tasks. Bacterial buildups and a high risk of infection are the result. Winkelsas has come down with pneumonia a number of times.

"The biggest problem is the respiratory system, more than anything else," said her pulmonologist, Dr. Akinyemi Ajayi, who practices in Winter Park. "It's amazing how the simple things in life become so important at that point." Ajayi said that life expectancy is in the mid-30s, though new ventilator technologies and other advances could push it well beyond that. There are many unknowns.

Muscular degeneration has affected Winkelsas' spine and given her a wiry, hunched frame, bent to almost fit the contours of the wheelchair in which she spends all her waking hours. Although she has used the chair since age 2, she never has become accustomed to certain things.

"Sometimes people stare and stuff. And I still, of course, get upset," she said. "But you have to kind of ignore it. ... It's mostly little kids who stare — they just don't know, they're curious. You just keep going."

Winkelsas can't turn her wrists or cut her own food. Her friends at school put a straw in her drink at lunch. Typing with just her two index fingers, she applied for and won one of three George W. Jenkins Scholarships at the University of Miami. Jenkins founded Publix Super Markets, which partly funds the scholarships awarded to students with strong academic credentials, significant financial need and a history of overcoming

adversity.

In her college application essay, Winkelsas emphasized hope, opportunity and possibility. "Many minds united will solve unfathomable problems and make their answers clear," she wrote. "Working together, we can support our weaknesses with the strengths of others to accomplish remarkable tasks."

Growing up with her parents and an older brother in Apopka, Winkelsas wanted to get outside with the other kids who were roller-skating in the neighborhood. Soon, budding roller skaters were grabbing the handles on her wheelchair as she pulled them down the street.

In high school, she wanted to take up a sport, and she chose bowling. The school league affixed a small, ramplike device to her wheelchair. She would roll herself forward and stop abruptly, causing the ball to slide down the ramp and into the lane. She was on the varsity team for three years straight. Highest score for a game: 181.

Teachers at Wekiva praised her ambition, drive and relentlessly curious mind.

"She's an inspiration for teachers," said the Advanced Placement director at Wekiva, Brian Charboneau. "It's a teacher's dream to get students like that. She's inquisitive, asks questions, wants to know things."

But someone with Winkelsas' physical shortcomings knows there are new problems to confront. Going to college is not as simple as packing the car and finding the dorm room. Winkelsas' mother, Keely, is her full-time caretaker. The family owns a small commercial printing shop in Orlando, and their health insurance allows for only 20 nursing visits a year, hardly adequate for someone who needs round-the-clock attention. Her parents are considering paying another student to do the job, but they're still figuring that out.

"We're kind of like a team, almost. And after 18 years, some of the things that she needs I can even anticipate without her expressing her needs," her mother said. "I'm a nervous wreck."

So is her daughter, but in a way that sounds like anybody who's heading off to college. She may not live a typical life, but she has the typical fears about making friends, finding the right classes and leaving home.

On Friday, Winkelsas joined about 500 other Wekiva grads clad in maroon caps and gowns inside the cavernous arena at UCF. As Winkelsas worked her way through her speech, what stood out was its universal qualities. She highlighted unity with the phrase "We are Wekiva" and called everyone Mustangs, the school's mascot. She took a playful jab at one teacher's "corny jokes."

Students' names were called, and they lined up to take their diplomas. The faculty stood and congratulated them one by one as they filed off the stage.

Winkelsas took her diploma and made her way down the line of teachers. They had to bow a little to shake her hand.

jofreeman@tribune.com or 407-650-6361

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