



Strong, smart and bold

Young woman proves Asperger's isn't stopping her dreams

By DAVE MASON
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Alix Generous would love to become a clinical psychologist, psychiatrist or neurologist. She has the brains for it.

She isn't letting anything stop her, not even Asperger syndrome.

"Nobody is perfect, but you're still worthy of having a great life and doing what you want to do. We can't always control what happens to us, but the greatest power we've been given is to how we choose to react to adverse situations," Ms. Generous, 21, told the News-Press by phone from her home in Burlington, Vt. She grew up in Potomac and Bethesda, Md., and is now a psychology and neuroscience major in her junior year at the University of Vermont.

Ms. Generous has learned to rise above the challenges posed by her disorder, a form of autism, and she's encouraging others to reach for their dreams. She'll address Girls Inc. of Carpinteria at its annual Women of Inspiration Luncheon at 11:30 a.m. Monday at the nonprofit, 5315 Foothill Road in Carpinteria. Emcees are Ana Delgado and Maria Zamora, girls who are active in Girls Inc. of Carpinteria.

In addition to Ms. Generous' talk, the luncheon will feature awards to Women's Fund of Santa Barbara; Cynder Sinclair, CEO of Nonprofit Kinect, a consulting business for nonprofits; and Rebecca Costa Smith and Lindsey Connelly, founders of Destined for Grace, which provides aid and education for children in Haiti.

Victoria Juarez, Girls Inc. of Carpinteria executive director, praised the honorees for their service and Ms. Generous for being a role model for girls. The nonprofit's mission is to help girls be strong, smart and bold.

"Her determination, her grit, her acceptance of who she is as a person has made her successful, along with the support of her family and those around her," Ms. Juarez, 36, told the News-Press.

Ms. Generous said she's particularly interested in giving this talk, the first one she has done for a Girls Inc. chapter, because of the nonprofit's work in encouraging girls to go into science, technology, engineering and mathematics, known often as STEM. "But I won't say, 'You all should go into science' when there are 10 girls there who want to be artists. I'm going say, 'You should never stop yourself from doing what you love.'" It was a long road to Ms. Generous' dreams.

She was misdiagnosed during her childhood with bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other illnesses. Finally at age 11, she was correctly



COURTESY ALIX GENEROUS

Alix Generous, who has overcome challenges related to Asperger's and is studying at the University of Vermont, will address a Girls Inc. of Carpinteria luncheon.

girls inc.®

diagnosed with Asperger syndrome.

The disorder affected her social skills and ability to focus.

For example, if Ms. Generous were taking a test in a classroom, she would find it difficult to tune out extraneous sounds. She would be distracted by a fan blowing or a teacher clicking her pen.

Asperger's also made her hypersensitive to others' emotions and some foods and gave her an over-heightened

sense of touch.

"Certain textures make me furious, make me cringe," she said.

She said she's different in other ways. "My mind moves really fast. I'm always three or four thoughts ahead of what I'm verbalizing now."

She had to adapt to succeed in school and life.

Her parents sent her to a treatment center/boarding school in Utah, and when that one didn't work, they allowed Ms. Generous to pick another facility for her middle school years. It fell right into her lap.

Or rather, jumped into it. "I stepped into this treatment center, and there was this cat who ran up to me and jumped up into my arms and wouldn't let go of me. And I love animals," said Ms. Generous, who was 13 at the time. She took the cat's love as a good sign as she entered Maple Lake Academy,

a boarding school designed to help kids with learning disabilities and emotional disorders, in Payson, Utah.

"The center changed my life," she said.

She said she knew she had to be open-minded and accepted the help of the school's staff.

"I was open to anything. I was a blank slate," Ms. Generous said. "I was a clump of clay willing to be molded into whatever I needed to be to be awesome."

She said the school helped through a combination of compassion, understanding and, when necessary, discipline. "They could distinguish from when I was misbehaving and when it was something that had to do with Asperger's."

"They specialized in training for social skills, how to advocate for yourself in

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school, how to introduce yourself at party," Ms. Generous said. She did well in her studies and taught herself how to play the piano and guitar—well enough that she was accepted into summer youth programs at the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

She graduated from Maple Lake Academy at age 15 and went to Olney Friends School, a Quaker college preparatory high school in Barnesville, Ohio, where she graduated in 2010. Afterward, she attended College of Charleston, in Charleston, S.C., before transferring in January to the University of Vermont. She said she's doing well and has many friends. "I have an amazing boyfriend."

My biggest dream is to become a clinical psychologist. I just worry I won't get into a program. My GPA is not that great," said Ms. Generous, who has a 2.9 grade point average (close to a "B" average). But she remains determined and would love to go to Harvard University.

And she said if she doesn't become a psychologist, psychiatrist or neurologist, she may become a researcher exploring the science of the brain.

Truth is, smart, successful people have had Asperger's. People such as Albert Einstein.

"I may not be the next Bill Gates," Ms. Generous said, "but I hope to help people make a change in the world for the better."

For now, she's trying to help people through inspirational talks.

Her speaking career began when Ms. Generous won a contest, which resulted in her giving a talk in 2012 at a United Nations biodiversity conference in Hyderabad, India. The next year, she talked about dealing with Asperger's at a TED Talk in Albuquerque, N.M., where she got a standing ovation. (TED Talks are conferences arranged by the nonprofit Sapling Foundation.)

"I want to give people hope. I have experienced a lot of messed-up things, but no matter what adversity I faced, I was able to overcome it," Ms. Generous said. "I know a lot of speakers stress that message. But mental health is not something people talk about. People are scared to admit they have stuff going on because people will judge them. I'm hoping to get rid of that by speaking more."

In particular, she wants to inspire young girls. She recalled rewarding experiences such as the time a girl who was 5 or 6 came up to her after a public school talk and said she wanted a career in biology and the ocean.

"It's something I'm really passionate about: to empower girls from the inside out," Ms. Generous said. "I want to help girls or anybody to believe that even if they're not perfect, they're still worthy of love and awesomeness."

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FYI

Alix Generous, a University of Vermont student who has succeeded despite having Asperger syndrome, will address Girls Inc. of Carpinteria at its annual Women of Inspiration luncheon at 11:30 a.m. Monday at the nonprofit, 5315 Foothill Road in Carpinteria. The event also will feature awards for Women's Fund of Santa Barbara, Cynder Sinclair, CEO of Nonprofit Kinect, and Rebecca Costa Smith and Lindsey Connelly, founders of Destined by Grace, which provides aid and education for children in Haiti. Tickets cost \$75. To purchase, call Girls Inc. of Carpinteria at 684-6364 or email concepion@girlsinc-carp.org. Proceeds will go to the nonprofit's programs, including its Eureka! program for college-bound girls.

For more information, go to www.girlsinc-carp.org.