Ms. Wheelchair Utah Speaks on Disability | CPD

Kelie Babcock lets Riley Carpenter wear her crown.

Kelie Babcock doesn’t see herself as the pageant type. She’s an advocate and a good spokesperson. She participates in the Becoming Leaders for Tomorrow project at the CPD. She loves talking to people, helping build understanding and breaking down misconceptions about disability. She’s a Weber State University graduate who works at the Tri-County Independent Living Center in Ogden. But until last November she wasn’t a pageant contestant. “Doing Ms. Wheelchair Utah was kind of random, kind of out of character,” she said. She got into it when she met Meg Johnson, the first Ms. Wheelchair Utah and the program’s founder. They came together at a baseball game in Ogden (Kelie was ushering to raise money for a wheelchair basketball league). Johnson began talking her into competing. “I have to convince almost every participant to participate,” Johnson said in an email interview. “Girls who grow up in wheelchairs tend to think there is no place for them on stage. … Ms. Wheelchair Utah is the ‘inner-beauty’ pageant, but all of our contestants are outwardly beautiful and we dedicate the pageant to helping them see that.” “She was pretty determined about it,” Babcock said. Eventually Babcock decided that the pageant had some aspects that appealed to her. “I love talking to people about disabilities … if this could help with that then it could be really fun.” When she won, it opened up more opportunities to share her message. She was a recent guest speaker at the Jon M. Huntsman College of Business at Utah State University. She has also met Utah Governor Gary Herbert, who posed for photos with Babcock, Johnson and Shannon Millet, the first attendant. “He acted like we were the only people important enough to meet with, even though his scheduler told me of the huge day he had and all that he had to do,” Johnson said. Babcock used the opportunity to slip the governor a letter about another foundation she was involved in. When she spoke at USU she repeated her philosophy: “Disability is not a tragic situation. It’s just life.” Babcock was born with a condition that made her physically small and caused her joints to contract. She grew up thinking: “I’m different. Oh, well.” But when her spine began cramping her lungs at age sixteen, it affected her breathing. Eventually she had to go on a ventilator—and that meant using a wheelchair, too. For a while, she wondered what to do next. Then she decided to finish her education because it would be key to her independence. “It has been,” she added. So she went to college, taking Vincent the Ventilator with her. She thinks of advocacy as a personal responsibility. “If you have the knowledge and the education then you also have the responsibility to get involved,” she said. She tries to educate policy makers on the needs of people with disabilities. Budget cuts have to happen, she said, but she wanted to be sure people understand what they are cutting before they make those hard decisions. At USU she spoke about disability, life, her boyfriend and her car—a Mini Cooper that her creative-genius dad retrofitted so that it could carry her wheelchair. First, though, he made some major changes. “I cried actual tears when I saw the back ripped out of this brand-new car,” she said. That’s all a memory now, though. The car is put back together, it carries her chair and Vincent the Ventilator, and Babcock doesn’t just drive. She drives cool.