

Against All Odds: Evie's Story

Written by Katie Purdy

Anyone who has met Evie will happily tell you that she is every bit of sunshine, sass, and silliness one 4 ½ year old little girl could ever be. She is truly the epitome of all things great and pure in the world - our blessing we never knew we needed.



However, at the time of her birth we were given a much different story about how our life would most likely look when we received her diagnosis of Trisomy 21, more commonly known as Down Syndrome. This is a non-preventable spontaneous process in utero where the 21st chromosome is copied 3 times instead of the typical 2 times. Due to this 47 chromosomal difference, experts immediately told us of all the things she may never do or learn how to do, like walk, talk, run, be potty trained, ride a bike, play sports, develop relationships, go to school,

get a job, get a college degree, or even live independently. We felt absolutely hopeless those first few days. And to make ours and Evie's situation even more of a whirlwind, she is actually a fraternal twin to a neurotypical sister, Adalynn. Thankfully, through some educated health care resources and an incredible community, we were connected with the Birth to Three program before we even left the hospital. This was the first time we realized that Evie's diagnosis was actually life changing, not life ending.

At just 6 weeks old, Evie became a part of the Achievement Academy "family" when she started in the Birth to Three program. Miss Laurie began working with Evie and quickly realized that Evie was a smart, curious, and fun little girl. As a twin, Miss Laurie knew it was important to avoid comparing the sisters to one another. Every child develops differently, reaching milestones at various stages and times, and it was especially important to focus on Evie's individual strengths. Many individuals with Down Syndrome have hypotonia, or low muscle tone, which means their bodies have to work 2-3 times harder. External motivators and rewards were crucial to help Evie meet her goals. In her first year, we worked tirelessly on critical early intervention skills.

Adalynn joined in on many of those first sessions, too. Their twin bond



runs deep with love, laughter, learning, and competition, with Evie sometimes annoying her sister - just like any other sibling duo. Adalynn's pride in Evie's progress towards her goals in inches and miles is nothing short of inspirational. And in true sister fashion, one of Evie's greatest joys in life is to beat her sister at everything!

Miss Laurie appreciated the strong support system surrounding Evie, between us as parents and our extended family. We were actively involved in the intervention sessions and eagerly anticipated every new assignment for developmental play 'homework' to work on skills between visits. This provided a strong foundation for the next chapter in our Achievement Academy story: attending the ESE Pre-K.

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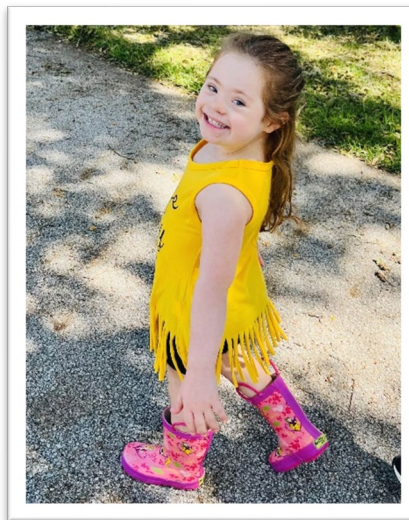
Evie's first day at Achievement Academy was another pivotal moment. At just 18 months old, she was going to school 5 days a week. I honestly don't know how we all survived, but it was the best possible opportunity we could give Evie. Many tearful hours, days, and weeks have come and gone since that first day - sometimes out of happiness, others frustration, and occasionally defeat.

Miss Kathy provided constant feedback, support, and direction that allowed Evie to grow, learn, and develop beyond our own hopes for her. We learned just as much during this time as Evie did. That is something we never truly grasped or appreciated until now: seeing how much Achievement Academy provided both for our girl and for us. She continues to amaze both us and the staff with her growth and development. She excels in her speech, occupational, and physical therapy sessions, and Miss Alyss describes her as a friend to everyone who loves to take care of other people. She is smart, gives the best hugs, and makes everyone a better person just for knowing her.

Today, Evie is 4 ½ years old and thriving beyond our greatest imagination. It is heartwarming to see our Evie singing,

dancing, playing soccer, and enjoying all that life has to offer. She adores swimming and earned the nickname "Mermaid Evie" for her love of the water, including fishing, snorkeling, family days at the beach, and spending time on the boat with her Daddy. She is our little animal lover and will spend as much time cuddling our kitty Maui as she possibly can.

The child we were warned at birth of all the things she may never accomplish is now a confident little girl who has never met a stranger, isn't afraid to speak her mind, gives the best hugs, and loves her family and friends with her whole heart. We will forever be grateful for all that Achievement Academy has given to Evie and our family from the time we brought her home with the Birth to Three program, and then continuing as a student in the Charter School. While we will be sad to leave at the end of this school year, we are so excited for all the amazing things Evie will continue to achieve!



Encouraging Speech/Language Development through Technology

We know that technology has a huge impact on all of us today, and since children are more tech savvy these days, therapists are now able to utilize technology to help encourage and motivate students, improve participation, and reward activities in a new and exciting way. This not only makes for a more engaging learning environment, but it can also result in performance improvements across the board.

There are thousands of "apps" designed to teach children everything from letters and numbers, spelling, counting, and basic arithmetic. But did you know that many available apps work on vocabulary development including but not limited to shapes, colors, animals, body parts, clothing items, music, and much more? Therapists can use this technology to supplement instruction during therapy time, as well as reinforce basic concepts in a more motivating way for those children who are not as willing or able to learn through conventional means.

You can also find numerous "specialized apps" that can target other specific areas of difficulty many of our students display besides speech/language development. These apps can assist in the development of fine motor skills through letter and shape tracing, hand/eye coordination, and even address visual tracking for those students who are visually impaired.

Smart phones, tablets/iPads can also be equipped with software that will turn it into an alternative speech device which can supplement ways for non-verbal or minimally verbal children to communicate their basic wants and needs. For example, a child who is unable to indicate a choice by speaking, (ie. "I want cookies") is able to use this program to speak for them. By touching the picture of the item that is desired, the smart device will speak the word. Giving a non-verbal child a "voice" of their own.

New Playground Equipment for the Bartow Campus!

We are pleased to unveil the newest addition to the Bartow Campus!

At Top Chef of Polk County 2022, we asked our guests to help us Fund-the-Need to purchase and install a replacement for the existing structure, which was no longer safe for our students. The outpouring of support was amazing, and in July, the old structure was removed and the space was prepared for the new piece to be installed. After a brief delay for Hurricane Ian to pass through, the structure was installed and is ready for our students to explore and play on their revitalized playground space!

Thank you to the many members of our community who made this vision a reality!

Save the Date for Top Chef of Polk County 2023!



We are excited to announce that, following two years of scaling the event down to smaller groups, we will once again bring this event back to a single venue with the guests and Chefs together! This year, the event will be at Lakeland's Bonnet Springs Park event space, and we will use both indoor and outdoor spaces of this beautiful park. We are excited to welcome back many of our returning Chefs while having some new faces join the crowd, eager to compete! Will Chef Lucy Cortes-Castaneda, Top Chef of Polk County 2022, hold on to her title or will a new Chef earn bragging rights as Top Chef of Polk County 2023? This is an evening that you won't want to miss!

We hope you will join us on Monday, February 27, 2023 at 6pm for an evening of fun and fellowship, with great food and a fantastic live music performance by Nashville's very own Willie Shaw. Experience the fierce competition between the Chef & Community Leader teams, sample their delicious signature creations and libations from Polk County's leading Chefs, and bid to win at the Silent and Live auctions. The real winners are the children who benefit from our programs. All proceeds of the event help us give children with special beginnings brighter futures. We are so grateful for the community's support for our mission.

Contact Mandy Fulton at mandy@achievementacademy.com to learn more about sponsorship opportunities and plan to join us on February 27th for an event you won't want to miss!





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Thank You!

We are grateful to our community partners who help us fulfill our mission to give children the opportunity to achieve their maximum potential!

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