

Katy's Little Sunshine Girl

Ally McCollam, an outgoing third grader at Griffin Elementary always keeps a smile on her face and doesn't let Down syndrome slow her down



DANCER



STUDENT



FRIEND

Written by Cherri Northcutt

Like many Katy kids, Ally McCollam, age 9, is a super involved student whose favorite subject is music. She takes ballet and gymnastics lessons, plays soccer, and enjoys singing in musicals at school. She's the oldest child in the family and enjoys playing with her brother Shane, age 6, and her 17-month-old baby sister Lilly. And like many other children, Ally says "My favorite thing to do at home is play outside." However, there is one thing that distinguishes her from her peers at Griffin Elementary. Ally was born with Down syndrome.

Down syndrome is the most commonly known genetic condition and occurs when an individual is born with a full or partial extra chromosome. About 6,000 babies in the U.S. are born with Down syndrome each year. Traits of Down syndrome may include low muscle tone, small stature, an upward slant to the eyes, and a deep crease across the palm.

"It was difficult to hear that diagnosis at the time," says Ally's mother Maite McCollam. "I was in recovery from a C-Section and this was hard to accept." The doctors suspected that Ally had Down syndrome because of low muscle tone and an eye slant. She also has a heart defect but so far hasn't needed surgery.

Playing Alongside Her Peers at Griffin

The outgoing third grader learns and plays alongside other students in a general education classroom. "We are firm believers in inclusion, where Ally is not segregated from the other kids," says Maite. At Griffin, Ally has daily math and speech instruction but spends the rest of the day with her class. Her parents find that being in a general education class aids Ally both socially and academically and helps with her behavior. "We are very blessed to be at Griffin. The kids, the teachers, and the coaches have been fabulous," Maite shares.

Gaining acceptance from others is a constant challenge for children with Down syndrome. "We want people to treat

Ally McCollam has found love and acceptance at Griffin Elementary and in the Katy community

Some of Ally's **Favorite** things

Color: *Pink*

Toy: *Barbies*

TV Shows: *iCarly, Shake it Up*

Movies: *Cinderella, Snow White, Spy Kids*

Restaurants: *Wendy's, Pei Wei, Buffalo Wild Wings*

Activities: *Ballet, gymnastics, soccer, singing, and playing with her friends and siblings*

Favorite Teacher:
Mrs. Susie Limas

Animal: *Horse*

Song: *You Don't Know You're Beautiful by One Direction*

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Ally McCollam enjoys spending time with her family in Katy, parents Mark and Maite, brother Shane, and little sister Lilly



For more information about Down syndrome visit ndsx.org



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Ally as a regular 9-year-old girl and get to know her instead of just seeing the Down syndrome first,” Maite shares. With her bubbly attitude and positive outlook, Ally has made good friends at school and in her neighborhood. “My best friends are Lauren and Lindsey,” Ally adds.

“What I love the most about Griffin Elementary are the teachers.”

-Ally

Celebrating Her Uniqueness

The McCollam’s also found social acceptance in the community when they moved to Katy in January 2010 and became involved in the Down Syndrome Association of Houston and its Katy Community Group. The McCollam’s are committed to doing everything they can to help Ally be strong and independent. “Every person is unique,” Maite says, “people with Down syndrome have something to offer society and should be respected.” She wants others to realize that, like everyone else, individuals with Down syndrome have feelings, likes and dislikes, and distinct personalities.

“Things are harder for Ally,” Maite shares. “She has sensory integration issues so she needs a lot of sensory input to help her wake up and get ready for the day.” After that, Maite walks to school with Ally and her brother Shane.

Maite says Ally has an outgoing personality and has several playmates at school and in her neighborhood. “Just having that acceptance means so much,” Maite says. With her winning smile and quick hugs, it doesn’t take long for people to warm up to Ally. **KM**



CHERRI NORTHCUTT and her family have enjoyed living in Katy for over 12 years.



Just prior to her performance in the Nutcracker, Ally's photo debuted in Times Square

Ally’s Times Square Debut

Every year, the National Down Syndrome Society produces a video presentation to showcase the lives of children and adults with Down syndrome. The video is shown on the jumbo screen in Times Square in New York City, kicking off the Down Syndrome Awareness Month. This year, the presentation featured a touching photo of Ally McCollam, just prior to her performance in Stephanie’s Dance Studio One’s production of *The Nutcracker*.

Ally was excited to be part of the Times Square presentation. She and her family watched the live footage via webcam. “Being on the video was cool and fun,” Ally says. “I wanted everyone to see my picture.”

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