

# TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

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## Taunton 8-year-old ready to take Meeting Street Telethon by storm

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TAUNTON - You may have seen her irrepressible, irresistible smile lighting up billboards around Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts.

And in less than a week you can catch her in action singing, telling her life story and just generally melting the hearts of anyone who tunes in.

She is 8-year-old Taunton resident Mary MacDonald and she will be co-hosting the Meeting Street Telethon live on WPRI and Fox Providence on Saturday, Jan. 27.

Mary said she is a little nervous and extremely excited at the prospect of being on television.

“I’m chatty, chatty, chatty. I know everybody. And I am very happy. If somebody’s smiling, I smile. I always look at the positive,” said the Elizabeth Pole Elementary School third grader.

The outgoing little girl who loves to sing and dance and write and draw has been receiving outpatient rehabilitation services since she was 3 years old at the Schwartz School in Dartmouth, which is part of the Meeting Street organization, based in Providence.

Mary was born with a rare neuromuscular condition called arthrogryposis multiplex congenita, which can be translated as multiple curved joints, said Mary's mother, Alanna MacDonald, a receptionist at the Taunton DPW.

That's a mouthful but in her inimitable, disarmingly upbeat way, Mary cuts through the confusion.

"My legs were contracted like the end of Cape Cod when I was born," Mary said.

Alanna said arthrogryposis multiplex congenita is an umbrella term that can have multiple causes. In Mary's case, the cause is unknown.

"Mine just happened, like I'm happy. That just happened," Mary said from the living room of her Tremont Street home - where she lives with her mom, stepdad Leif Glass, who is a software engineer, and her stepsister and very good friend BreyDann Glass.

Over the years, Mary has undergone multiple surgeries and therapies to make her as mobile as possible, her mother said.

The most recent surgery transferred tendons from the back of Mary's legs to her knees to allow her to extend her legs straight out, which she couldn't do before.

That's pretty important if your ultimate goal is to walk without braces or crutches, as Mary is determined to do.

She's already come a very long way, in no small part thanks to the support, specialized equipment and other resources she's found through the Schwartz School, Alanna said.

"The staff at The Schwartz Center is amazing. They are dedicated and it truly makes a difference," Alanna said.

Mary said she loves all the cool gadgets and fun activities at the Schwartz School.

The playground has a swing she can use in a wheelchair and she does aquatherapy in the pool.

But her favorite activity hands down is riding a specially-designed three-wheel recumbent bicycle around the hallways, making the rounds visiting her many friends, be it students or staff. (To donate to a fundraiser to buy Mary a bike of her own visit <https://www.greatbikegiveaway.com/MaryMac>.)

Mary has faced many challenges but she never gets discouraged, her mother said.

“She’s always had a can-do spirit,” Alanna said.

Schwartz School Chief Administrative Officer Brenda Motta said it wasn’t a hard call selecting Mary to appear on the four-hour live telethon, which is hosted every year by children who receive services at Meeting Street in addition to WPRI news anchors.

“She’s such a natural. She can meet anyone and she doesn’t get intimidated. She’s been through a lot but I’ve never seen her down. She’s a little social butterfly,” Motta said.

Motta said Mary seems to be enjoying every minute of the telethon experience, right down to picking out a sparkly dress and the photo shoot for the billboard.

“She’s in her element. This is her moment,” Motta said.

Mary said she has a lot of big plans for when she grows up.

She wants to be an astronaut because there’s so much to explore in outer space and she’d like to see the moon and the stars up close.

She’d also like to be a police sketch artist to combine her love of drawing with an exciting opportunity to go along for rides in the cruisers.

And she’d like to be a pirate.

“But not the stealing part, just the kind part. I would find treasure and give it to other people who need it,” she said.

All of her ambitions have one thing in common.

“Every day is like a new adventure,” said Mary, who belongs to a Pop Warner football cheerleading group for kids with disabilities, or as Mary likes to say, “differences” – as in different abilities.

Mary also takes an adaptive dance class taught by one of the other Schwartz School moms. Just because she can’t dance like everyone else doesn’t mean she intends to sit on the sidelines. She dances in her own way, Mary said.

“Everyone can dance” - whether they use their arms or legs or just sway to the music, Mary said.

Alanna said Mary gets tired easily because she has to work so hard to do some things most people take for granted, like walking and raising her arms high above her body – because her shoulders were also affected by the arthrogryposis multiplex congenita.

But all that extra effort has only made her stronger — so strong that she can swing across the jungle gym from bar to bar without any help, her stepdad said.

Motta said Meeting Street School started as just that — a school — but has expanded to be so much more.

Founded in 1946, Meeting Street works with more than 5,000 families around the region annually providing prenatal counseling, early intervention, early Head Start, pediatric rehabilitation services and a variety of other programs.

And the telethon is the non-profit organization’s largest fundraiser, helping pay for equipment and programs that would not otherwise be available, Motta said.

The annual event attracts tens of thousands of viewers and last year the telethon raised more than \$1,130,000, according to a Meeting Street spokesperson.

Alanna said it is a pleasure to help spread the word about the Schwartz School.

With the school’s help she has watched Mary achieve milestones, make countless friends and thrive.

Mary has gone from a wheelchair, to a walker to crutches to learning to walk with just braces.

And she has had a great time along the way.

In a testimonial, Alanna wrote:

“Meeting Street has provided her with amazing experiences she would not otherwise have. Mary loves the events that Meeting Street has held over the years. She enjoyed the carnival, the roller skating event and the walk-and-roll fundraiser. Mary hopes to inform people about Meeting Street and the message of diversity, inclusion and generosity. She would like to pay it forward and use her gifts/personality to spread the word about the amazing work the people at Meeting Street do with the help of their generous supporters.”

Mary said in addition to telling her story at the telethon, she'd like to sing the audience a song and she knows just the one, “This is me” from “The Greatest Showman” soundtrack.

On a recent afternoon Mary sang the Golden Globe winning original song in her living room:

*I'm not a stranger to the dark*

*Hide away, they say*

*'Cause we don't want your broken parts...*

*But I won't let them break me down to dust*

*I know that there's a place for us*

*For we are glorious...*

*I am who I'm meant to be, this is me*

As Mary sang that last line, she pumped her hand exuberantly in the air and beamed with a radiant smile that lit up the room.

“I love that song,” said Mary, squeezing her mother's hand with excitement.

*The 42nd annual Meeting Street Telethon will air on Saturday, Jan. 27 from 7-11p.m. on WPRI 12 and FOX Providence. For more information or to make a donation, visit <http://www.meetingstreet.org/Telethon> or contact Katie Wood at [events@meetingstreet.org](mailto:events@meetingstreet.org) or 401-533-9230.*