## Tumblers hope to find success on the mats

Christian Academy, Ballard gymnasts head to AAU Junior Olympics

By JOE KONIAK

Special Writer

Jennifer Smith and Barbara Roberts may tumble their way to gold medals this weekend at the Amateur Athletic Union/USA Junior Olympics national gymnastics meet in Syracuse, N. Y.

The meet will feature some of the finest amateur talent from across the country.

The girls will fly to Syracuse today for the meet, along with their mothers and their coach, Steve Von Ebers.

"We have a chance of being at the top," said Barbara, who will compete in the 15-and-older senior division. "I'm not going to set my hopes too high, I'm just going to do the best I can."

If she doesn't do well, she has a familiar shoulder to cry on.

Since Jennifer moved to Goose Creek from Chicago in 1983, she and Barbara have become best friends, both in the gym and away from it.

"We do everything together," said Jennifer, a Ballard

High School freshman.

She and Barbara, who are the only national qualifiers from Jefferson County, also share a confidence-boosting prayer before each event they compete in, said Barbara's mother, Mary Ann.

Their families, who are paying about \$1,500 for the trip, also are close. Both are members of Northeast Christian Church on Old Brownsboro Road and their mothers often attend gymnastics meets together.

The girls also are each other's best critic.

"We tell each other what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong," said Barbara, 15. "We don't know as much as a coach, but it helps us a lot."

The pair train together 16 to 24 hours a week with Von Ebers at J'town Gymnastics Inc., 2223 Plantside Drive.

The hard work helped them qualify for the nationals at a May 30 meet in Cythiana, Ky. Barbara placed first in her division, and Jennifer, 14, placed second in the 12- to 14-year-old junior division.

Both girls also qualified in the overall competition, which combines scores from the uneven parallel bar, vaulting, balance beam and floor exercise routines.

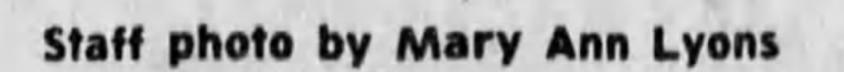
To prepare for the grueling national competition this weekend, the girls reluctantly entered the Bluegrass Games two weeks ago.

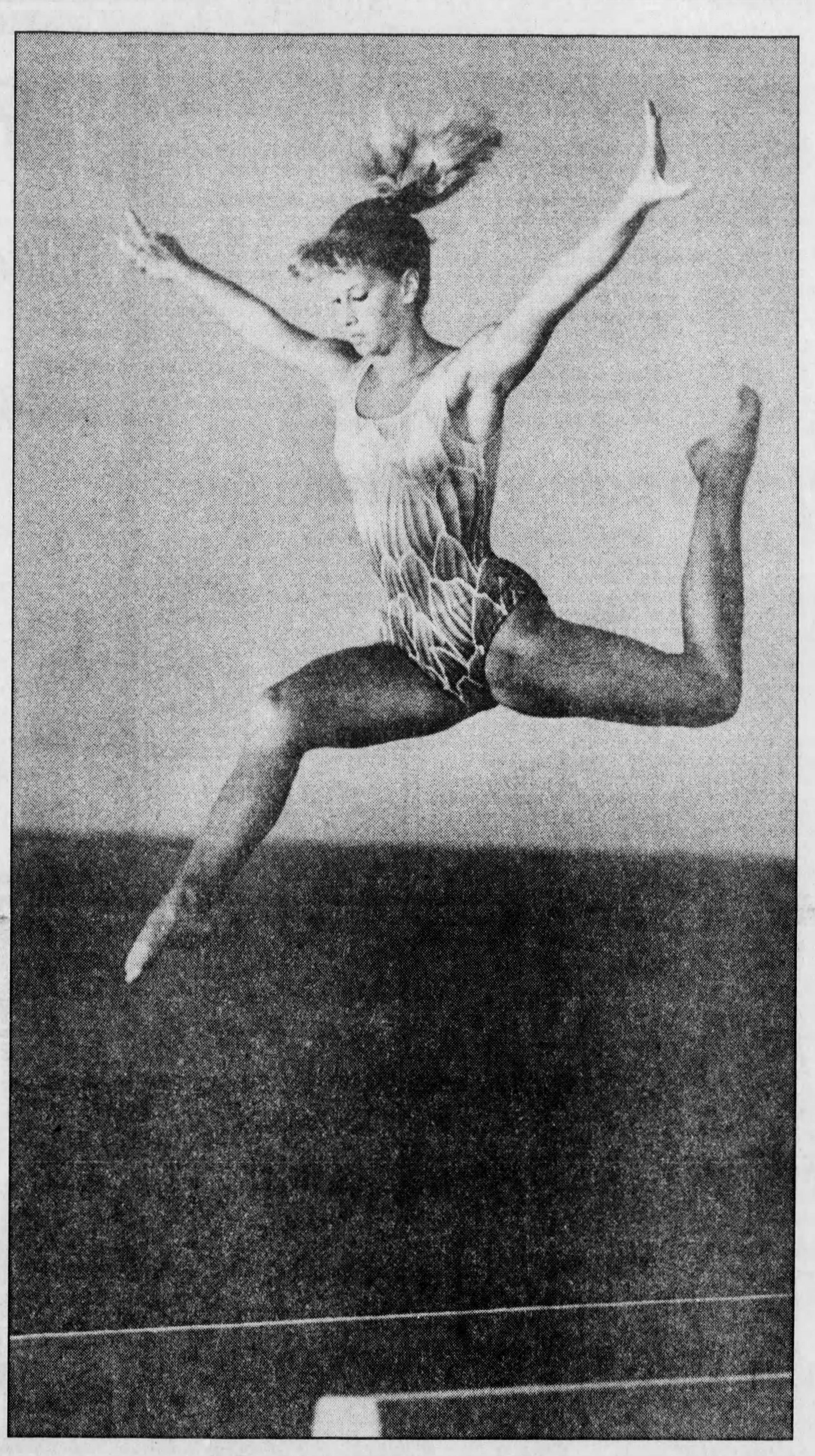
"We didn't even want to go," Jennifer said. "We went just to have a good time and not worry about winning."

But they each won their division — and gained the

See TUMBLING Page 9, col. 1

Jennifer Smith practiced a balance-beam routine recently. She and Barbara Roberts will compete in the Amateur Athletic Union/USA Junior Olympics national gymnastics meet in Syracuse, N.Y.





## Tumbling pair hope to find success on the floor mat

Continued from Page One

motivation to work harder for the AAU titles, said Barbara, a Christian Academy sophomore.

"It made me more motivated to practice for the nationals," said Barbara, who has taken gymnastics classes for 10 years.

Practice means working extra hours to refine difficult maneuvers in their routines.

Last Saturday they spent eight hours practicing at Northern Kentucky Gymnastics in Covington. The facility has a 7-foot-deep pit insulated with foam rubber to catch an athlete in vaulting falls. The girls also practiced eight hours Monday and Tuesday in Jeffersontown.

"We work really hard so we're ready for the full routines," said Barbara, who lives in Forest Hills.

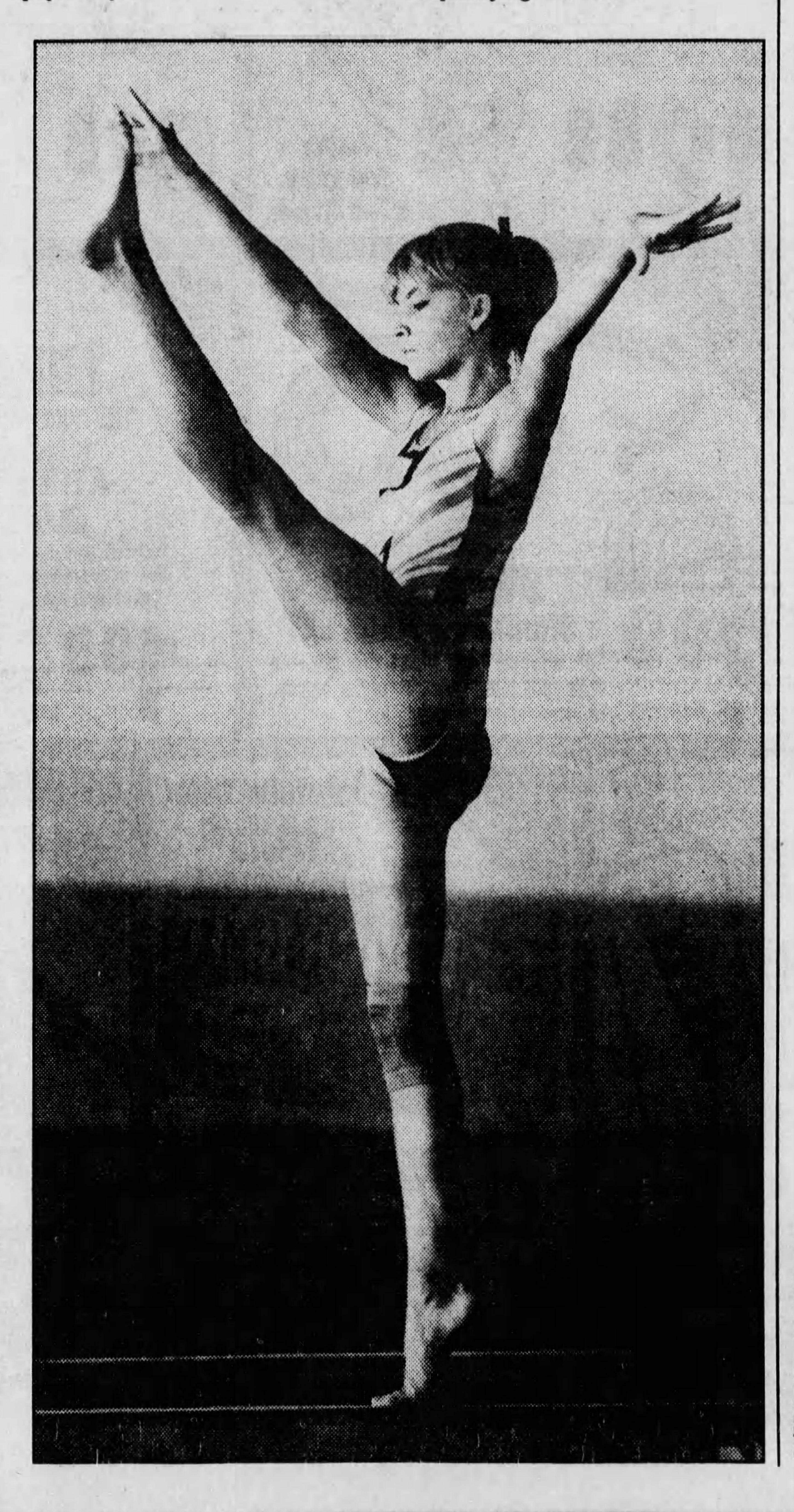
Jennifer's strongest events are vaulting and the floor exercise, where the highlight is a back flip with two full twists, Von Ebers said. Barbara, he said, is consistently strong in all four events.

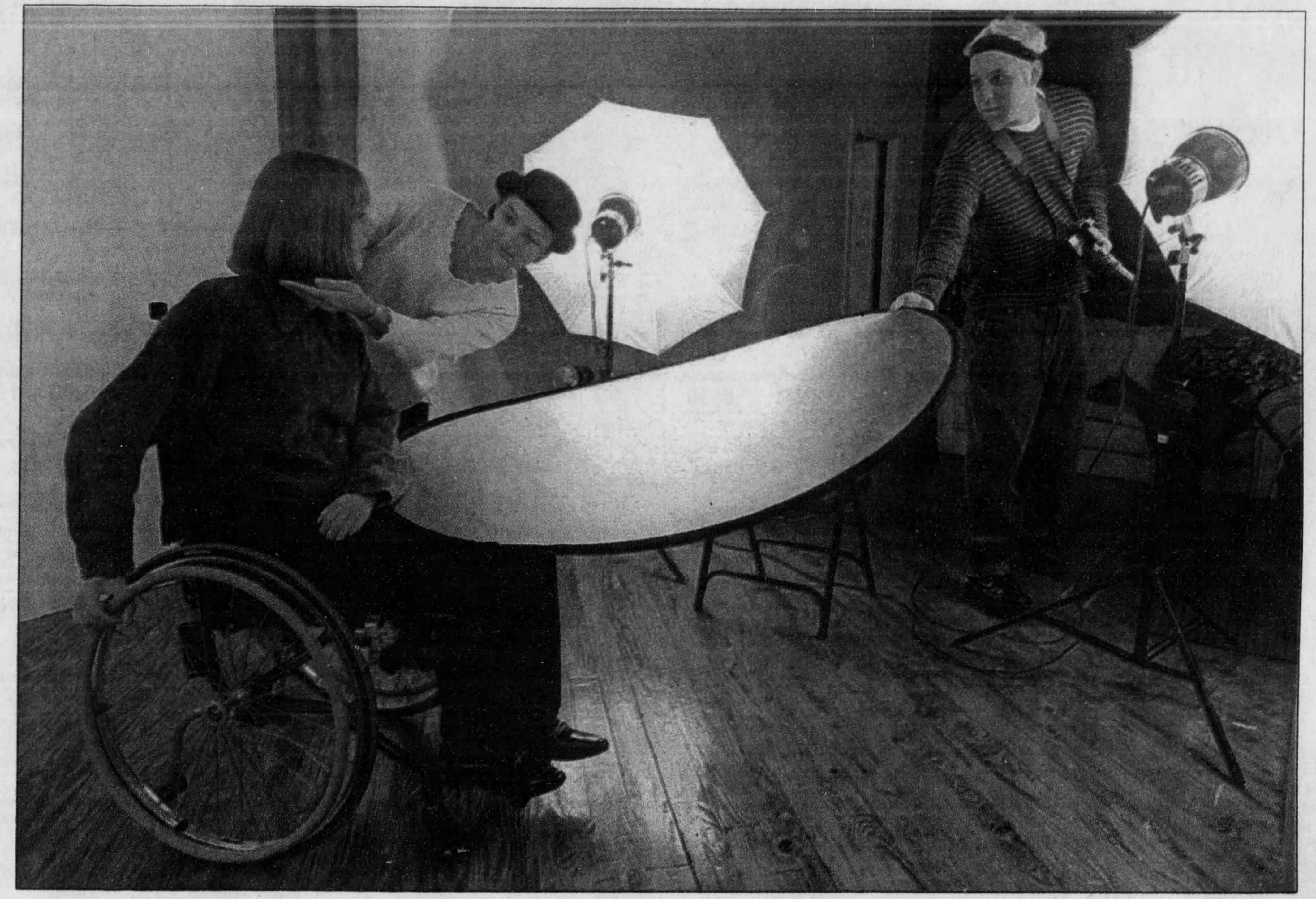
"Both girls have the potential," to do well in Syracuse, Von Ebers said, but cautioned "they're going to run into some very stiff competition."

But winning isn't everything, Mary Ann Roberts said. "Just being able to go will be a good experience."

Barbara Roberts concentrated while practicing a balance-beam routine last week at J'town Gymnastics.

Staff photo by Mary Ann Lyons





BY PAM SPAULDING, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Jeanna Townsley helped fix Jenny Smith's hair as photographer Chris Kaufman prepared for a shoot this month at MJK Studio, a modeling agency.

# Spirit faith

## Former gymnast triumphs often despite paralysis

By BOB DEITEL
The Courier-Journal

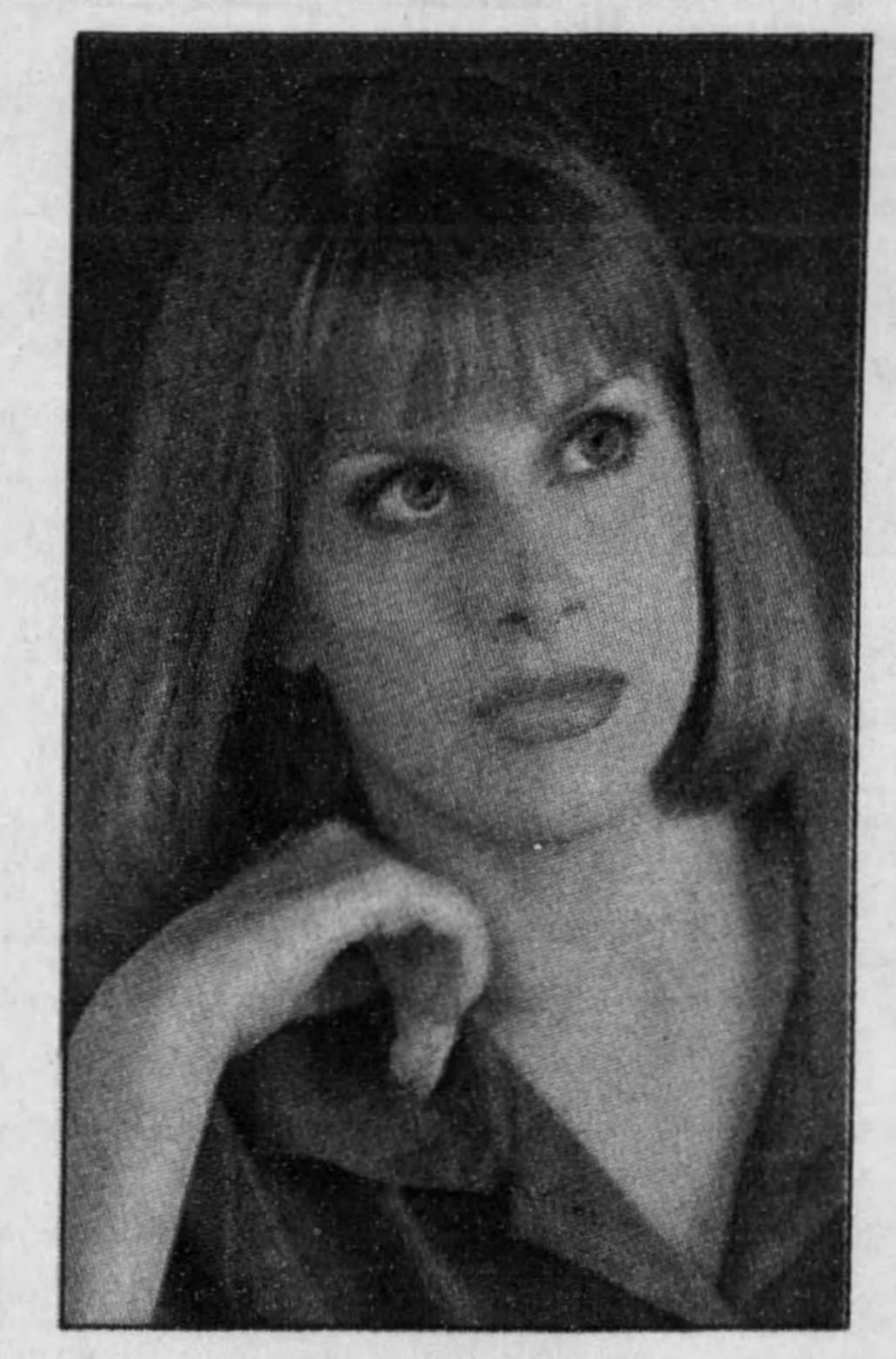
Another month, another milestone for 25-year-old Jenny Smith of Louisville.

This one involved a master's degree in counseling psychology from the University of Louisville. She earned it just days ago by finishing a five-month internship at a local youth treatment center.

Next up: a series of intricate physical challenges. On Jan. 5 she undergoes the first of five surgical attempts to compensate for some of the arm and finger motion she lost in 1989 when a gymnastics accident left her paralyzed from the chest down.

One operation will transplant muscle from her right shoulder to right tricep. Four surgeries will move muscle and tendon around her forearms, wrists and fingers. Only time will tell how much additional strength results.

Beyond that, the next big event likely will be a leap into the work-



ing world, although she expects to have to wait until the medical work ends, probably this summer.

And honestly, she confided, "it's actually great timing. I had no clue what was ahead of me."

scarce now, the future itself was downright unimaginable 9½ years ago, when Jenny Smith made a life-

altering, momentary misstep.

She was 16, a student and cheer-leader at Christian Academy of Louisville and a serious gymnast for most of her life. Then, during a breather at an outdoor cheerleading workout, she decided to practice some tumbling and launched into a round-off back handspring layout — a back flip she had nailed thousands of times before.

She slipped while taking off, fell after flight and fractured her spine, compressing her spinal cord.

Even now, she's recognized on the street by strangers who remember.

"A lot of people still say, 'Are you that cheerleader?' " she said, scrunching up her face slightly to make clear that her preferred term is "gymnast," not cheerleader.

No matter. What counted was that people around town rallied to help her family cope with hospital bills, frightening new challenges and grief.

An elementary school held a "Jump Rope for Jenny" moneyraiser. Former U of L and University of Kentucky basketball stars played a benefit basketball game. Smith's teachers logged extra duty

See FORMER
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Smith, at left in both photos above, was active in gymnastics and cheerleading while she was a student at Christian Academy of Louisville.

## Former gymnast awaits surgeries, other challenges

Continued from Page Cl

to keep her up with classwork. The remodelers council of the Louisville Home Builders Association voluntarily enlarged and made the Smiths' home wheelchair-accessible and Jenny-friendly. Community donations bought a van that was modified with wheelchair lift, hand controls and other adaptations.

The van's odometer now shows 62,000 miles, most of them logged with Jenny Smith at the wheel.

"It's opened up so many opportunities," she said of her prized vehicle. "And just having the independence . . .

THAT INDEPENDENCE helped last summer when Smith was asked to serve as Kentucky's entrant in a Ms. Wheelchair America pageant in Charlotte, N.C.

She wasn't sure she wanted the honor. Considering herself more of an introvert, and tending to be softspoken, she didn't relish all the speaking the competition required. She certainly wasn't looking for renewed public attention.

She went anyway, and had the time of her life.

"It was such a great experience." she said, telling of parties, rollercoaster rides and even her first dance-floor fling since her accident.

Women ages 21 to 60 were eligible to compete, and 20 made it from their states to the nationals, with honors based on accomplishments and communications skills. Smith didn't place among the top finishers. but she came away eager to promote the growth of a competitive Ms. Wheelchair Kentucky pageant, to give more women the same chance.

Back home, she now gets invited to speak to school groups. She tells about herself and answers uninhibited questions about such basics as getting dressed and going to the

bathroom.

At Manual High School not long ago, she told 200 or so students about her life, her choices and issues of disability and accessibility. "It was dead silent," she recalled the respectful reaction. "There was no microphone, and I don't have a real loud voice, but they were really quiet and attentive."

SOME NIGHTS she dreams that she's an active gymnast. This is good, not sad, she said. "It's actually like I'm there. I can feel the muscles and everything. That's always neat."

Her waking hours sometimes

bring less liberating feelings.

One tough adjustment has been needing help to handle some daily duties, from preparing meals to getting up and ready each morning and going to bed at night.

A home-health worker comes to help with mornings. Her mother or



Jenny Smith discussed a pump, which was implanted to deliver medicine for her muscle spasms, with neurologist David Watkins.

grandmother handle night duties. (When she starts working, Smith said, she'll lose the Medicaid that pays for the home-health aide, and insurance won't pick up the tab.)

Another annoyance is needing help getting into her wheelchairs, Smith said. She uses a large, power wheelchair when driving but has to move into her smaller, manual chair to fit into others' homes. One result: She's less likely to pay social calls if she has to ask friends for help.

But Smith isn't shy about pushing for better treatment of wheelchair users in public places.

She has written letters to movie theaters that provide wheelchair space only in the front rows.

She complained when her family was misinformed about the locations of wheelchair seating at some stage performances, causing the family to buy costlier tickets than necessary.

She also says too many "wheelchair-accessible" restrooms are too cramped to navigate easily.

And parking spaces? "Parking is better and worse," she said. More spaces seem to be set aside for people with disabilities, but the number of disability permits seems high and competition can be keen, she said. And too many drivers encroach onto the extra-wide spaces needed for side-loading vans, such as hers.

ONE CONSTANT in her life has been her belief in God. "I always had a real strong faith in knowing, for me, what was right and wrong,' said Smith, a member of Southeast Christian Church.

"Without knowing God, I don't think I would have gotten through the accident."

Even her coming surgeries seem divinely inspired. Her parents, Carol. and Joe Smith, were at a workshop at Northeast Christian Church and learned that the workshop leader was married to a doctor who'd done muscle and tendon transfers.

Jenny Smith already had been helped by other medical means. Implanted just inside her abdomen is a small pump that delivers medication to her spinal-cord fluid. It soothes muscle spasms in her legs, stomach, back and, sometimes, hands. She previously took pills for the spasms, but they left her groggy; she sometimes fell asleep in class.

Nothing ever seemed to slow her determination for education.

By taking one independent-study course, she graduated a year early from Christian Academy. She graduated with honors and a bachelor's degree in psychology from U of L.

She plans to use her coming months of surgery to study for an April exam to become certified as a psychological associate.

Slender and quick with a smile, Smith hopes to try modeling, too. She recently finished a modeling course and will look for chances when her surgeries are behind her.

She's not looking forward to the physical scars. "I'm worried about that," she said. "But I'm looking at the independence."

In the meantime, yet another milestone is fast on the way.

On Jan. 29, she turns 26.

#### YOUNGSTERS ARE JUMPING FOR JENNY





STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL LUSTER

Above left, Ronnie Rowcotsky waited his turn during yesterday's "Jump Rope for Jenny" benefit at Norton Elementary School in eastern Jefferson County. Jenny Smith, looking on in center of right photo, is the Christian Academy student who was paralyzed last July in an accident during cheerleading practice. Next to Jenny was her mother, Carol.

## Paralyzed gymnast hopes for more independence

Surgery and a chance to be more independent may be in store this year for Jenny Smith, a competitive gymnast who was paralyzed from the chest down in a 1989 cheerleading accident.

The 18-year-old former student at Christian Academy of Louisville was honored last year by the National Association of Home Builders for her strength and determination.

Since then she's completed her freshman year at the University of Louisville with a predominance of A's. She also has been active in Young Life, a non-denominational Christian youth group, and she has diligently pursued physical therapy to regain motor coordination and the use of her legs.

But because of spasms in her legs, stomach and fingers, Smith's physical therapy recently was cut from twice a week to twice a month. The resulting loss of strength cuts her ability to dress herself and be

otherwise independent.

But Smith, who isn't one to waste time complaining, hopes to have a long-awaited surgical implant that her doctors say will end the spasms and help her become more independent. The surgery fell through in December 1990 because of a medical insurance snafu.

"I'm going to have it. I just don't know when," the Murray Hill Pike

woman said.

Despite the frustrations, Smith's busy schedule of academic and extracurricular activities also includes



Jenny Smith

learning to drive -- a victory her doctors thought improbable.

"It's really exciting, and a little scary," Smith said. She takes driver's training through the state vocational-rehabilitation program.

She's also excited about her family's plans to buy a special van similar to the one she's learning with.

"It'll take some time, but eventually I'll drive it on my own," she said. "I'll be able to go places by myself so my parents don't have to drop me off. That's bad enough when you're 13, but when you're 18 it's something else."

Gayle Pressman



BY TRAVIS DOSTER, SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Jenny Smith and her father, Joseph, tagged some of the wheelchairs that have been collected so far. She is working to send refurbished wheelchairs to people in Third World countries.

#### Ex-gymnast still inspires cheers by helping others

By SCOTT WADE The Courier-Journal

Springing across a tumbling mat, 16-year-old Jenny Smith was one of Kentucky's most promising young gymnasts. She inspired people to cheer.

Today, confined to a wheelchair since a tumbling accident in 1989, Smith is still making people cheer for her courage and dedication to helping others.

The 27-year-old Murray Hill resident is one of about 20 people across the nation working to send refurbished wheelchairs to people in poor countries, including El Salvador, Mexico and Afghanistan.

"She's a person on the very short list of people who, when you meet them, you become a better person for knowing them," said Steve Oliver, president of the Mobility Project.

Since 1997, when the Coloradobased group was started, it has delivered about \$1 million worth of medical supplies and refurbished wheelchairs, walkers and crutches.

Smith and Oliver will be collecting wheelchairs and other aids for the disabled on Saturday.

Smith said she became aware of the lack of wheelchairs in poor countries two years ago when she met a Polish woman at her church, Southeast Christian. Smith said she asked the woman about access for the handicapped in Poland.

don't even have wheelchairs,' " Smith said. She has been dedicated to helping such people since, she said.

To many people, including her father, Joe, Smith's willpower, emotional strength and ever-present smile provide constant encouragement.

"I'll get up sometimes with a backache and I think, 'Thank God for a backache,' "said Joe Smith, a retired FBI agent. "It gives you an understanding that we're all just a fraction away from that.

"She's been an inspiration. She even inspired me to go back and get my Ph.D. I figured if she could make the dean's list every semester (at the University of Louisville) while taking seven medications, then anything can happen if you want it badly enough. She taught me that." Smith has been inspiring people

since she was a little girl. At age 11 at Kammerer Middle School, she already was competing in Class 1 gymnastic competition, one step below the Olympic level. She had won five gold medals at the state level and had been one of two Jefferson Coun ty gymnasts to qualify for national competition two years before her accident. At 10 a.m. on July 11, 1989, Jenny

and her fellow cheerleaders at Christian Academy of Louisville were practicing at Seneca Park for a national competition. During a back flip, her feet slipped n wet grass and she landed on her head, instantly compressing her spinal column

and causing paralysis from the shoulders down. Smith couldn't feel anything and wasn't sure how badly she was hurt

but she said she knew the situation



"She said, 'Access? Many people. Smith, who has used a wheelchair since 1989, is shown in Toluca, Mexico, with a wheelchair recipient during a trip last February.

#### How to help ...

Jenny Smith will accept donations for the Mobility Project in the rear parking lot of Oxmoor Center shopping mall from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. If you'd like to help but can't make it to Oxmoor, call 412-8689. You can also visit the Mobility Project Web site: www.mobilityproject.org.

was serious when her best friend's mother started praying. Still, she was at peace, she said, and laughs now about what was most on her mind. "I was on my face and couldn't

move. I was worried that bugs were going to crawl up my nose and I couldn't get away. I'm such a girl," she said.

Her parents were on vacation with her brother, Matthew, in Florida. Carol Smith, her mother, flew back o Louisville while Joe Smith drove. He said the 12-hour trip was unbearable.

"We were driving through a huge electrical storm, and what I saw in

the sky was how I felt on the inside," he said. Eleven years later, Jenny Smith

and people who know her say she remains the effervescent, can-do person she was before the accident. In the following months, she completed her education at Christian Academy one year early, with the

help of teachers who came to her

hospital room, then earned a bache-

lor's degree in psychology and a

master's degree in counseling and

psychology at U of L.

In the meantime, community sup- to port stunned the family. The remodelers' committee of the Louisville Homebuilders Association helped make her home "Jenny friendly." The students at Norton Elementary, where her mother works in the office, raised \$13,000 in a Jump Rope for Jenny fund-raiser, and former U of L and University of Kentucky basketball players held a fund-raising game. Other contributions from the com-

munity helped her family buy a specially equipped van.

In 1998, she represented Kentucky in the Ms. Wheelchair USA pageant. She speaks to student groups when asked and works as a volunteer, teaching English to immigrants at the Jewish Community Center.

She's had five surgeries in the past year and can now type, write and ap ply her own makeup. She is looking for a job.

In February, she and Steve Oliver went to Mexico to deliver wheelchairs and other items. People were drawn to her smile, Oliver said. A waitress asked Smith to speak

with the vaitress' father, who had lost hope after being in a wheelchair a short time, Oliver said. Smith and the man talked for 30 minutes, with both of them eventually laughing. "I love working with her," he said.

"She was an incredible person to have along, because of her attitude, her smile, her joy — just living life and accepting the hand she has been dealt and not letting it change her life, but just accepting that it's going in a different direction."



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY S. CHAPMAN

OVERFLOWING FRIENDSHIP: Fellow Christian Academy cheerleaders cried and cheered when Jenny Smith arrived at a benefit basketball game last night at Ballard High School. She was paralyzed after a July 11 fall while practicing. Former University of Louisville and Kentucky basketball players played to raise donations for her trust fund.

THE COURIER-JOURNAL LOUISVILLE, KY. MONDAY, JULY 31, 1989.





Jenny Smith trained on the balance beam, above, before competing in the 1987 Amateur Athletic Union national meet in Syracuse, N. Y. At left, she was joined by her parents, Joe and Carol Smith, in her hospital room last week.

STAFF PHOTO BY PAT McDONOGH

#### 'SITTING STILL' BUT STILL SETTING GOALS

#### Cheerleader's toughest training now is for mobility

By KATY J. MONK Staff Writer

She had been a gymnast since age 3, and after a dozen years of dedication she made it to a national competition — the height of Jenny Smith's gymnastic career. Now, the 16-year old Louisville student is embarking on another, arduous kind of training.

This time the training is not for the perfect tumbling routine. It's for the use of her arms, perhaps her fingers — for however much of her body she can reclaim after a cheerleading accident three weeks

ago that broke her neck and left her paralyzed from the chest down.

"It feels like my arms weigh 100 pounds each," she said last week in her room at Kosair Children's Hospital. "But I'm getting more movement back. Today I can control my right wrist where yesterday I couldn't. I even wrote ... a letter yesterday with my left hand, even though I'm right-handed." She laughed a little.

"My fingers don't move yet. But they

sure. Nazar said the July 11 accident, in gonna use my fingers,' she will be able to which Jenny slipped while doing a back- do it."

flip, compressed her spinal cord so severely that it's unlikely she'll regain fine motor coordination in her fingers. It also is unlikely that she will be able to use her legs. But it's too early to be certain.

"We won't know the final outlook for Jenny for three to six months," he said.

Jenny's father, Joe Smith, a federal employee, believes in his daughter. "She's al-Her doctor, Gregory Nazar, is not so hospital lounge. "Boy, when she says 'I'm

That kind of self-discipline propelled Jenny to Class I gymnastic competition, just below the Olympic level, by age 11. She competed in the 1987 Amateur Athletic Union national meet in Syracuse, N. Y., after winning five gold medals at the state

She stopped competing to devote time to other activities but began coaching at ways been very determined in what she Kentucky Gymnastics Academy. Her forwanted to do and very disciplined," he mer coach, Scott Workman of the Louissaid, leaning forward from a couch in a ville Gymnastics Club, praised Jenny's

> See TEEN'S PAGE 4, col. 1, this section

#### Teen's hardest training lies ahead

Continued from Page B 1

skills. "She was a very, very strong competitor."

It was in preparing for a cheerleading competition, as part of the Christian Academy squad, that Jenny was injured. She slipped on damp grass in Seneca Park in Louisville while doing a series of back-flips her father said she must have done 10,000 times.

But if Jenny's competitive drive is strong, her faith in God is stronger, and she is drawing on that faith.

Jenny has spent a lot of time

praying since the accident. She prays "just that whatever God wants to happen happens. And I'm just thankful for all my friends."

Those friends have been there for her in full force.

Flowers, teddy bears and constant visitors fill her room and occupy her mind. With physical therapy, she's setting and reaching goals: scratching her nose, writing a letter. But Jenny has goals she may not reach, even with the six to 12 months of physical therapy her doctor says she may need.

Jenny has played piano for 10

years, and she wants to play again. make any difference how good you She also plays keyboard for Captive, are if you're doing a dangerous a Christian rock group, and the band is counting on her recovery.

To encourage her, Captive's three other members now sport haircuts like Jenny's - shaved above the ears for the tongs that hold her head immobile.

One day last week, Jenny's bangs were freshly curled by her mother, Carol, an office worker at Norton Elementary School. But the annoyance of not being able to take care of such details herself had gotten to Jenny that day.

All the energy of 16-year-old youthfulness concentrated itself on her face. Her blue eyes, framed by blue-mascaraed lashes, rolled in frustration at the worst part of her new routine — "sitting still." But she smiled a few minutes later when she spoke of her friends. Christian Academy is a close-knit school, and Jenny is at the center of the clan.

Several teachers have volunteered to keep Jenny up to date in her class work; others in the community are helping in various ways. Former U of L and University of Kentucky players held a benefit basketball game for her last weekend, raising about \$3,500.

But her Kosair stay alone is likely to cost up to \$15,000, her doctor said; her father predicted the months of physical therapy could cost well over \$100,000. The family has insurance, but "it will be a financial burden," Joe Smith said.

On top of that, they expect to have to modify their ranch-style home in Eastern Jefferson County, adding ramps, widening doorways for a wheelchair and possibly buying a special van.

Whether the accident could have been avoided is hard to say. Quin Bailey, chairman of the governor's Advisory Council for Sports Medicine Programs, said, "It doesn't

trampolines, three-tier pyramids and some other stunts — only if the squad is covered by optional KHSAA insurance.

No regulatory body in the state

has real jurisdiction over high-

school cheerleader safety. Cheer-

leaders must follow Kentucky High

School Athletic Association safety

standards — which prohibit mini-

thing."

Christian Academy has that insurance, but it does not cover summer cheerleading activities.

Not long after the accident, when Jenny was in the intensive-care unit. she heard a song on the radio by Christian rock singer Bryan Duncan. Called "Strong Medicine," it spoke of dealing with a friend's illness. Jenny asked a friend to bring her the tape. The words seemed fitting:

I'm forced to stare at the outside Where nothing ever seems to change

No miracle, no remedy, not any-

And time becomes a ball and chain.

But on the inside things can hap-

In a war we'll never see There'll come a victory And you can say to me, Don't be afraid.

#### Police say bad leads hurt probe

Continued from Page B 1

find a man fitting that description. At least four officers spent two weeks full-time on it, Miller said.

"We spent a lot of man-hours on that part of the investigation," he said. "We called Louisville and Lexington and had them assisting. We even had a couple of people in with crosses on their heads. A great deal of our investigation was tied up in that lead."

But it proved false.

When officers ran into a lot of back to Brown for more informa- ered the prime suspect. tion.

"It turned out this man just lied to us," Miller said. "He wasn't even in the store at all. We asked him why he lied and he said, 'I just lied.' He didn't give any other reason."

Brown has been charged with falsely reporting an incident, a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in prison. He has pleaded not quilty in Shelby District Court

"They are showing a lot of confidence in us and that helps," he said. "There is not a lot of second-guessing going on."

Despite the weeks of frustration associated with the case, Miller feels that authorities are making progress.

"It's going pretty good now," Miller said. "I hope sometime in the next couple of weeks we'll have something."

There is no one suspect in the case, Miller said, despite reports that a man arrested in Louisville dead ends, Miller said, they went after a series of robberies is consid-

Louisville officers alerted Shelbyville police after arresting the man and finding similarities to the Shelbyville case. The man's home was searched and he is still on Miller's list. But so are four other people.

"We are not down to one individual," Miller said, "but we are looking a lot harder at a few people



PRICES EFFECTIVE JULY 30 THRU AUGUST 5, 1989 AT A IPATING CONVENIENT FOOD MARTS QUANTITY

### Bouncing back a bit at a time

#### Teen paralyzed in cheerleading fall is determined

By PAM RUNQUIST Staff Writer

Jenny Smith doesn't spend much time thinking about the past.

With a full course load at the University of Louisville, an active social life and twice-weekly visits to a physical therapist, Smith is too busy to dwell on life before a 1989 cheerleading accident that left her paralyzed from the chest down.

"You just can't compare," she said, referring to life before and after the accident. "I'm looking

ahead."

Those who know Smith well say it's this forward-looking attitude that has kept the 18-year-old, former competitive gymnast from being overwhelmed.

"Psychologically she is doing fantastic," said Smith's mother, Carol Smith. "She has never

plained."

"It's taken some getting used to, but she's adjusting," said Missy Cooke, a friend who is a neighbor on Murray Hill Pike. "Her spirits

are pretty good."

The Smiths' spirits got a boost last week when Jenny Smith was honored by the National Association of Home Builders for her strength and determination. The association also recognized the Registered Remodeler Council of the Home Builders Association of Louisville and its 1989 chairman, Gordon Hundley, for donating materials and labor to build a wheelchair-accessible addition to the Smith home.

Before the accident, Smith's life included competing in gymnastics, being a student at Christian Academy, playing keyboard for a Christian rock band and cheerleading. Her life was put on hold, though, in July 1989, when she slipped and fell while doing a backflip during cheer-

leading practice.

Doctors at Kosair Children's Hospital determined she had severely crushed her spinal cord. They weren't sure how much motor coordination she would regain in her fingers or if she would be able to nominational Christian



STAFF PHOTO BY ARZA BARNETT

Jenny Smith has been honored by the National Association of Home Builders for her strength and determination.

use her legs again.

Despite that bleak prognosis, Smith has been recovering in what her mother described as "little tiny steps."

After four months in the hospital and more than a year of physical therapy, Smith now does her own hair and makeup each morning, moves her wheelchair around at home and at school and takes notes in class. She continues to work with her therapist on upper body strength to increase her mobility.

"The workouts aren't so hard," she said, but she admitted she gets frustrated that progress can be slow and that some goals, such as driving a car, may never be reached.

Despite the frustrations, Smith

'Psychologically she is doing fantastic. She has never complained.'

> Carol Smith Jenny's mother

has plunged back into a busy schedule of academic and extracurricular activities.

While in the hospital, Smith continued her studies and graduated from Christian Academy last spring - a year ahead of schedule. Now in her second semester at U of L, she is taking sociology, speech, religion and math courses. She said she likes college but has a hard time with math.

When she is not in class or studying, Smith spends time with her family and friends. She attends meetings of Young Life, a non-de-

goes shopping with friends. She also likes to listen to music, including tapes of her favorite band, White Heart.

Smith said the support of others has made the difference in her re-

covery.

One constant source of strength has been her family, including her grandmother, Betty Carter, who moved from Arizona to live with the family after the accident.

Her friends also have been "really supportive," helping her get to school and to other activities.

And people she didn't know before the accident "have been real nice."

Foremost among those former strangers are Hundley and other members of the Registered Remodeler Council, who donated about \$50,000 worth of materials and labor to build the addition at the Smith house.

Carol Smith says she doesn't know "what the family would have done without the council's help." Before the addition, which includes a spacious bathroom, living room, bedroom and wheelchair ramps, the family had trouble getting Jenny Smith around the house. Now, she is fairly independent.

She also is pleased with the addition.

"I always wanted to redo my bedroom," she said. "They've made everything a lot easier."

Her family and friends say they've done whatever they could to help. But they credit her recovery to her determination and positive out-

"She has handled it really well," said Scott Nethery, a U of L classmate who takes Smith to school three days a week. "She is never in a bad mood, and she's always joking around. She's just fun to be with."

STAFF PHOTO BY KEITH WILLIAMS

Major Waltman, top left, Bill Marrett and Matt Ridge, members of the Registered Remodeler Council of the Home Builders Association of Louisville, worked on a wheelchair-accessible addition to the home of Jenny Smith yesterday. Jenny was paralyzed in a cheerleading accident in July.

#### Guardian angels

#### 'Miracle' transforming home of paralyzed teen

By JOSEPH GERTH Staff Writer

Joe Smith believes in miracles. In fact, he witnessed one yesterday as he sat at his kitchen table and watched construction workers hoist a new wall into place on the rear of his family's home in eastern Jefferson County.

Smith is the father of Jenny Smith, a 16-year-old Christian Academy student paralyzed in a cheerleading accident in July. The miracle is \$55,000 worth of building materials and labor that a Louisville-area builders' association is donating to make the Smiths' home wheelchair-accessible.

"We call it a barn-raising," said Gordon Hundley, who helped organize the project. "And it's not costing the Smiths a thing — except a little inconvenience."

Jenny's father is more than willing to put up with the pickups in his driveway, the pounding hammers and the buzzing power saws. The "barn raising" is going to give Jenny more freedom, Smith said.

Jenny came home from the hospital two weeks ago to find narrow doorways, little space to maneuver



Smith

bathroom she couldn't even enter. Thanks to the Registered Remodeler Council of the Home Builders Association of Louisville, that will all

Volunteers from the council are building a recreation and study room on the back of the Smiths' house. They are also converting a garage into a bedroom, bathroom and large roll-in closet, as well as building two wheelchair ramps and widening four doorways.

Hundley, council chairman, said the group decided to act after he read a Courier-Journal article about Jenny's injury, her mounting medical expenses and the family's remodeling needs.

The builders have been preparing the site for about two weeks but have been slowed by bad weather, he said. Yesterday about 15 council members built the floor, wall sup-

her wheel- ports and roof for the additional chair and a room and added a new floor in bathroom she what used to be the garage.

Bill Marrett, owner of Marrett Remodeling, expects the project to move quickly. "It's always a lot of fun to get all these people involved—the excitement, the hustle and bustle. It's really amazing what you can do if you get the people a little motivated."

"They called before I had a chance to even think about it," Smith said. "When all of this happened, it boggled my brain.... But Gordon was right there saying, "We're going to do this for you." I can't thank him enough."

Clete Reinhart, owner of Reinhart Construction Co., said the council had been looking for a public-service project for about six months before Jenny was injured. "When this came up, it looked like a good place to put our efforts," he added.

Preparations began in August. Council members met with physical therapists from Baptist Hospital East to determine what Jenny

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#### Kentucky group to help paralyzed girl

A Louisville Christian rock group, Captive, will sponsor a benefit concert for Jennifer Smith, the Christian Academy cheerleader who was injured in July while practicing with her team.

Before her accident, which left her paralyzed from the chest

down, Smith played keyboard for the rock group.

The concert is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Sept. 30 at Memorial Auditorium, 970 S. Fourth St. Two other Louisville groups, Bride and Spanky Lee, will be featured.

Admission is \$5 and proceeds will go to the Jennifer Smith Trust Fund, c/o Northeast Christian Church, 9900 Old Brownsboro Road, Louisville, Ky 40241.

#### Paralyzed woman works to give wheelchairs to needy

#### Former gymnast's dedication aids those in poor countries

By SCOTT WADE
The Courier-Journal

It once looked like a wheelchair burial ground with old, used models stacking up in a room at Gould's Medical Supply in Buechel.

Owner Ken Gould said it was hard to throw away even a broken chair, knowing that somewhere, someday he would find someone who needed it.

Then he met Murray Hills' Jenny Smith, a 28-year-old former standout gymnast. Now paralyzed from her trunk down, with some use of her shoulders but not her hands, Smith is devoted to collecting and delivering refurbished wheelchairs to poor countries where disabled people have to crawl or be carried.

Recently, Gould joined a parade of people delivering wheelchairs, walkers and other such devices to the Buechel Fire Department, where Smith and Stève Oliver, national director of the Mobility Project, teamed up with the Buechel Rotary Club to collect the equipment.

Smith became paralyzed in 1989 during cheerleading practice. She slipped on wet grass at Seneca Park while doing a back flip and landed on her head, instantly compressing her spinal cord.

Twelve years later, the upbeat Smith is the first Midwest regional director of the Mobility Project, and Oliver said her work is making a big difference. Since early last year, she's made three trips to deliver equipment to Mexico, where her skill in Spanish made her a valuable part of the team, Oliver said.

The group also delivers chairs to such countries as Vietnam and Paki-

But Smith's biggest contribution, Oliver said, is finding equipment for the disabled in a part of the country where most people still don't know about the Mobility Project, or, more specifically, how they can put used wheelchairs to good use.

"That was me," said Ken Gould. "I had never heard of anything like it, and these chairs were just piling up. It's fantastic."

Gould said he heard about the Mobility Project twice in one weekend, demonstrating how word is starting to spread. One recent day he had a call from a Buechel Rotarian.

But the weekend before, at a bar mitzvah in Lexington, the news came from 13-year-old Alan Sea, who has cerebral palsy and is collecting for the Mobility Project as part of his

#### TO HELP

To donate equipment or money to the Mobility Project, call Jenny Smith at 425-1545 or e-mail her at jensmith10@aol.com.

own rite-of-passage humanitarian project. Alan can be reached at ajsea2001@yahoo.com.

The Buechel Rotary Club got involved after members read a Courier-Journal article about Smith in July 2000, club member Connie Ford said.

Ford's granddaughter, Seneca High School senior Brittany Stickler, is asking fellow members of the school's chapter of the National Honor Society to join her in helping by keeping an eye out for used wheel-chairs and volunteering at wheel-chair-drop-off days, like one planned for Southeast Christian Church next month.

Brittany, who is a cheerleader just as Smith was, said she feels for the people who don't have wheelchairs, and so she wants to help any way she can.

The Mobility Project was born in 1997 when Oliver was in Nicaragua and learned that handicapped people often stayed in their homes for years, crawling around after they grew too large to be carried.

He founded the project, which is based in Colorado, that year. It has a Web site, www.mobilityproject.org.

When chairs and other equipment are received, they are refurbished and then delivered by air to people in countries where a wheelchair can cost the equivalent of two years' wages.

So far, about \$2 million worth of medical equipment has been donated — including about \$15,000 worth during the current drive in the Louisville area.

After her accident at age 16, Smith said she was overwhelmed by community financial support for renovations of her home and to buy a special van. The support included a fund-raising basketball game by former players from the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky.

She then obtained bachelor's and master's degrees from U of L, and in 1998 she represented Kentucky in the Ms. Wheelchair USA contest.

Smith found out about the Mobility Project that year when she asked a Polish woman at her church, Southeast Christian, about handicap-accessibility issues in her country. The woman said accessibility was irrelevant because the people didn't have wheelchairs.



PHOTOS BY SAM UPSHAW JR., THE COURIER-JOURNAL

Jenny Smith and Steve Oliver, national president of the Mobility Project, watched a television interview as their group accepted used wheelchair donations.

Smith lives with her parents in eastern Jefferson County and spends most of her time in her relatively low-paying Mobility Project job, looking for people who know where to find wheelchairs. A planned trip to Vietnam next month was canceled when she couldn't find an airline that would give her a free upgrade to first

Because of her condition and the length of the flight, she said, she would have to be able to lie down, which is possible only in first class. But she said she didn't think it was right to use \$1,500 in Mobility Project money to pay for the upgrade.

"I'll get there someday," she said.
Oliver said he believes that.

"She doesn't know what 'You can't do that' means," he said. "Every time somebody meets her, they feel like they're a better person just by meeting her."

"She doesn't know what 'You can't do that' means. Every time somebody meets her, they feel like they're a better person just by meeting her."

Steve Oliver, national director of the Mobility Project, speaking about Jenny Smith



Seneca High School senior and cheerleader Brittany Stickler talked with Smith as they looked at photographs from one of Smith's trips to Mexico.