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## First-grader without hands wins penmanship award

### Annie Clark was born without hands, but you wouldn't know it from her penmanship

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By Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette

Annie Clark, a first-grade student at Wilson Christian Academy in West Mifflin who won a handwriting excellence award, demonstrates her prowess with a pencil.

By all accounts, Annie Clark, 7, a first-grader at Wilson Christian Academy in West Mifflin, is a hard-working and determined student who makes a point of learning from her mistakes and strives for perfection in her work.

So on the surface, it should come as no surprise that she won a national handwriting award from the Zaner-Bloser language arts and reading company. That is, of course, if you didn't know that she was born with no hands.

On Wednesday, Annie received one of two national handwriting awards the Zaner-Bloser firm offered for the first time this year to disabled students. The other went to a student in Eastlake, Ohio, who has a visual impairment.

Along with the Nicholas Maxim Special Award for Excellent Penmanship, Annie got a trophy nearly half her height and \$1,000. She was awarded the prizes during a surprise assembly at her school.

When the purpose of the assembly was announced and Annie's name was called, she appeared stunned and overwhelmed as she quietly made her way to the front to accept her trophy and a bouquet of flowers, dressed in a ruffled white skirt and bright golden blouse. Initially she left the assembly with her classmates because she didn't want to miss math class.

But she returned a few minutes later to talk with reporters and demonstrate how she writes with a pencil wedged between her arms.

Her parents, Tom and Mary Ellen Clark, said it's the same method Annie uses to feed and dress herself, cut with scissors and even paint her toenails.

"Annie has always been very, very determined, very self-sufficient in dressing herself and feeding herself," Mr. Clark said. "She can ride a bike. She swims. She is just determined that there's nothing she can't do."

Her father said she also types on a keyboard and uses an iPod Touch with no difficulties.

In an era where some schools are abandoning handwriting programs in lieu of keyboarding and other modes of technological communication, Wilson Christian Academy puts special emphasis on penmanship and good handwriting, school officials said.

All students in the school were encouraged to enter the first round of the Zaner-Bloser competition, which was judged by the school staff. In the first round, one student with the best handwriting was chosen in grades 1-8 to have a writing sample entered in the state competition, said Kathleen Wright, Zaner-Bloser national product manager for handwriting who presented Annie's award.

Annie's handwriting sample was chosen as the Grade Level Winner for the first grade at Wilson Christian Academy, and when her sample was sent in along with the other grade level winners, teacher Linda Messner included a letter explaining that Annie was born without hands.

Ms. Wright said that letter prompted contest organizers to forward Annie's writing sample to the competition for disabled students. The award was created to honor Nicholas Maxim, a fifth-grade student from Maine born without hands or lower arms, who entered the Zaner-Bloser competition last year. To be eligible, a student must have a cognitive delay or intellectual, physical or development disability.

When Annie spoke with reporters, she explained her handwriting technique, which includes capital letters at the beginning of sentences and punctuation at the end. "I think about doing words and spelling," she explained, adding that she has "learned to go slow."

Annie's can-do attitude may come from her family of eight siblings. The Clarks have three biological children, Amanda, 29, Amy, 25 and Abbey, 21. Abbey was born with Down syndrome, and the Clarks said their experiences with her opened their eyes to the world of disabled children. "I feel like God used that to teach us the value of every human being," Mrs. Clark said.

Devout Christians, the Clarks started to adopt disabled Chinese children. In addition to Annie, the Clarks adopted sons Travis and Talbot, 10, and Tyler, 18, all of whom are missing parts of their right forearm. They also have two other adopted daughters, Alyssa, 18, who also has Down syndrome, and Amelia, 4, who has an undiagnosed lesion on her leg.

The Clarks said while others might consider their family a burden, they consider their children to be blessings.

"If we didn't have them, the blessings and joys and all the fun we have had, we certainly would have missed out on that," Mr. Clark said.

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