

LOCAL REPORT

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SECTION

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He doesn't know the meaning of 'No'

Student's indomitable spirit rises above physical limits, prejudice

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He goes by Paul Stuart Wichansky. It's a mouthful, but to his mind it's necessary.

Paul Stuart, he explains, is the name of an exclusive men's store in Manhattan, so it already has some "credibility."

As if Paul Stuart Wichansky lacked credibility.

Of course, in a way, he is too good to be true.

Born with cerebral palsy, a brain defect that affects motor

coordination, Wichansky was unable to walk for the first seven years of his life. Then, in kindergarten, he lost much of his hearing.

But none of that deterred him. Today, he walks without crutches or braces and only a slight limp, which he is determined to correct with vigorous therapy and exercise.

He drives a regularly equipped car, a white 1989 Mercury Topaz GS that is his pride and joy, even though, Wichansky says, it has the engine of a lawn mower.

And, despite two hearing aids and a slight speech impediment, Wichansky — who brags that he looks a little like Tom Cruise — dreams of becoming an on-air weather forecaster.

"Everyone tells him you can't do that because you have a speech impediment, you have a hearing loss, cerebral palsy," says Carol Rutgers, director of the cooperative program at Cook College, "but he keeps going."

For this spirit, and his accomplishments, Wichansky was named this year as the co-op's

"Student of the Year."

He came up from Maryland for the ceremony because, as part of his cooperative learning — in which students earn money and college credit with related work experience — he is working for the summer with the National Environmental Satellite Data and Information Services. Wichansky is a weatherman, what the professionals call a meteorologist.

His master's thesis, which he is working on now, is called "The Dynamics of Mid-Atlantic Snowstorms during the Past 50 years."

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STUDENT: Persistence pays off



MIKE NIXON/The Home New

Paul Wichansky, a graduate student who was born with cerebral palsy, is this year's "Student of the Year" in the cooperative program at Cook College.

last 50 years.

This is his third placement at the federal agency located outside of Washington, D.C., which requested him back after his first tour of duty.

And Carol Rutgers says he has a good chance of being hired there once he's finished work on his master's degree at Rutgers University.

But Wichansky says he'd like to come back to New Jersey, to be near his family in Freehold.

And while he continues to talk about becoming a meteorologist on television, the gifted student is also thinking about going on for his doctorate and a career in teaching.

Carol Rutgers says he's a natural.

"He's very good at reading his audience and being able to get across his point," she says.

Wichansky also has had a lot of practice.

When he was 9 or 10, his mother, a school social worker, had him get up in front of a class to explain to the students that, despite his disabilities, he was just like them.

He brought in his car models,

his computer programs, a video of himself lip-synching to a Billy Joel song. He did it, he says, because "I want people to grasp who I really am."

And he did it again and again, making about 80 presentations in the decade and a half since then at schools in Princeton, Fair Haven, Freehold and now in Camp Springs, Md., a school district near his current job. As he got older, he took the program along with him, but he has finally decided his message is best for junior high kids. They are most receptive, most open to rethinking their prejudices, he says.

Although proud to win the \$250 award from the co-op, Wichansky counts learning to walk as his greatest achievement.

And, he says, "The biggest achievement in learning how to walk is learning how to fall."

Wichansky was not born with the instinct to protect himself when he tripped.

"I would just fall flat on my face," he recalls.

So he had to train himself to put up his arms, and fall with dignity. And then get up and keep on walking toward his dreams.