

## Auxvasse teenager battles spina bifida with unique therapy

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The Fulton Sun

Crippled most of his life by a debilitating spinal disease that hinders his mobility, one local teenager is now taking strides to stand on his own two feet.

Nathan Coleman, 17, of Auxvasse, suffers from a birth defect called spina bifida, often referred to as open spine.

The disease - which affects about 1,300 babies each year - attacks the backbone and, sometimes, the spinal cord, causing immobilizing effects.

Coleman has undergone 28 surgeries since birth, one of the most recent occurring in 2004 that caused him to lose the use of his legs and become totally dependent upon a wheelchair.

Now, with the help of a unique intensive physical therapy clinic based out of the North Oakland Medical Center in Pontiac, Mich. - called Euro-Peds - he is one step closer to attaining functional mobility and greater independence.

"They are teaching him how to live with spina bifida and other problems connected with the disease," said Coleman's mother, Jamie Coleman, who first took her son to the clinic in November after hearing about it from a friend. "And the results, so far, have been pretty amazing."

Using a device called suit therapy - which is an emerging regimen in North America for the treatment of non-progressive neuromuscular disorders like spina bifida and cerebral palsy - Nathan Coleman's gait and balance already have improved.



Nathan Coleman practices with a balancing ball, which helps strengthen his leg muscles, as his therapist Carolyn O'Conner looks on. (Contributed photo)

The techniques and concepts of the therapy originated in East Europe in the treatment of adult stroke patients, but eventually were used to treat children and young adults. NOMC Euro-Peds opened in 1999 as the first intensive physical-therapy clinic in the United States. The suit therapy is overseen by Dr. Colleen Noble, a board-certified neurodevelopmental pediatrician.

"Prior to the sessions, Nathan had difficulty sitting on the floor without falling over, and now he can," Jamie Coleman explained. "If he continues to progress, within a year to 18 months he could probably be walking again on his own."

The training sessions, she said, consists of 40 hours of intensive muscle-building techniques that teach her son skills to build his strength, mobility and balance.

"By the end of each session, he's pretty worn out," Jamie Coleman said. "But he's always ready to go right back each day."

Nathan Coleman's therapists are just as impressed.

"He's very tenacious," said Carolyn O'Connor, Coleman's primary therapist during his current session at NOMC Euro-Peds. "Ultimately, he will gain strength and mobility to regain his cervical range of motion and the use of both of his legs."

So as not to overexert himself, Coleman only can participate in the two-week program every three months. His next session is scheduled in April.

To show his determination to gain control of his life, Coleman gave up the first few days of his Christmas break to do his December session.

"I believe that you shouldn't give up on yourself and that you should try and do whatever you can to better yourself," he said. "Because wherever you are is better than where you could be."

Suit therapy is still considered investigational by many insurance providers and generally is not covered.

To help offset the expense, Jamie Coleman has set up an account in Nathan's name through the North Oakland Foundation's Adopt a Euro-Kid Fund.

Donations may be sent to 461 West Huron St., Pontiac, MI 48341. All donations will be used toward intensive physical therapy at NOMC Euro-Peds. All donations are fully tax-deductible and contributors will receive a letter of acknowledgment from the North Oakland Foundation - which is a non-profit agency.

"Patients work very hard to gain strength and new skills, and parents who invest two to four weeks out of their lives to bring their children to the clinic are typically very determined to do all they can to help their child reach their potential," said Anne Mancour, communications coordinator for NOMC Euro-Peds. "All of your donations are valued."