

South Alabama student created non-profit to dispel notions about people with disabilities



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MOBILE, Alabama— Pascagoula native Shaudell Brooks has been through a lot in her 23 years of life, but perseverance through tough times has allowed her to come out of hardships unblemished.

Brooks is a 23-year-old senior at the University of South Alabama pursuing a bachelor's degree in Public Relations and minoring in sociology. Brooks is also a 2011 Pascagoula High School graduate. During her time at USA, she has encountered obstacles stemming from the fact she has a form of muscular dystrophy, but she said she refuses to let her condition deter her from achieving anything she wants to accomplish.

Brooks has decided to launch a non-profit called, D.R.E.A.M.S., which stands for Disability Rights Equalizing Access and Motivating Success. Brooks said she is motivated by a specific experience.

"September 13, 2014, is a day I will remember forever," Brooks said. "We played Mississippi State in football and I remember going to athletics before the game took place to take precautions on if I decided to go to the game, where would I sit and how would everything go? I was told that I would be able to sit near the student section, but not in it. Initially, everything seemed to be cool, but when I got to the entrance, things changed. I was told that I could not enter through that specific gate because I was in a wheelchair. I went to another entrance where I was allowed inside with no issues, but when I got to the next entrance to sit near the student section, the police officer told me I could not go through. The officer looked around and allowed me and my friends through. Later, another officer came and told me and my friends we could not sit there while I already received clearance to be seated where I was. The disgruntled officer told me 'no' and says, 'either you're going to have to leave or your friends are going to have to leave and you will have to sit here by yourself.'"

"If they leave, I will have to leave," Brooks said she told the officer. "The officers responded and said, 'ok, go ahead and leave.' I cried because for one, it was embarrassing and secondly, it was discrimination. You are basically telling me that you are not going to allow me to sit here because I am in a wheelchair. I left, prayed, and cried about it and thought instead of taking legal action and getting the media involved, I would just create an organization about students with disabilities and advocate for them. In creating this organization, I wanted to bring students together across the University of South Alabama to let them know we are here, there is nothing you can do about it, and we will enjoy our college years the way students without disabilities can. Hence, D.R.E.A.M.S. was born."

Dr. Joel Erdmann, USA Athletic Director, responded saying, "We strive to provide all our customers, including those with disabilities with the highest of service and access leading to a positive experience at our games."

After viewing body camera footage, Erdmann cited issues with Brooks friends being somewhere other than the designated area they should have been in.

"Interaction with the students and campus police on the sidelines was recorded on their body cameras which helped piece the puzzle together," Erdmann said. "What happened is that her friends began wandering around the sidelines, specifically the surface of the field, which is definitely not allowed. The young ladies were approached and informed if they did not hold credentials for that area, you cannot be here. No one recalls anyone being kicked out of the game, they were simply asked to go back to the platform."

Brooks' passion led her into starting the organization and creating buzz around campus, but she discovered it was a little harder

than she originally thought.

"The process started, and it was slow and hard, but I received a great reception from the students," Brooks said. "They were excited for me and gave me great support." Brooks said the first year of the organization was a success, but she later realized that she wanted her organization to spread its wings and grow.

"I realized it could be bigger than what it really is," she said. "I don't necessarily have to keep it here at the university, but could branch out and help some other kids besides the ones here. This is when I began the journey of a non-profit and delving deeper into what I felt this organization could be and what it could provide as far as confidence and support goes."

"Growing up, all I could remember doing was attending a MDA (muscular dystrophy) camp and it was the best time of my life," Brooks said. "I took things I learned at that summer camp and applied them to my organization. The goal eventually is to hold a summer camp next year to let children and young adults have fun, as well as able body individuals to see, "Hey, they can do the same things I can do, there are just other routes we have to take."

Brooks work has inspired others on campus to get involved. Senior Chassity Lawton became a member of D.R.E.A.M.S. and credits Brooks for creating an organization that actually does work.

"D.R.E.A.M.S. is like my baby," Lawton said. "We put so much effort into it whether it be community service projects or anything, it opened my eyes to appreciate life more and I joined because I want to be a part of something on campus that was actually for something and not just to be in because everyone else is or because they think it is cool."

"This organization is bridging the gap because it really shows people that people with disabilities do not mean to have stigma attached to them," Lawton said. "D.R.E.A.M.S. shows that a person with a disability is just as normal as someone without a disability, but you just may need to take that extra step to open up and give them a chance."

"D.R.E.A.M.S. has been such a success here, I thought it would be wonderful to make it official and bring it home," Brooks said. "Growing up, there weren't many opportunities I had that were disability friendly or made me feel as one, so I believe by bringing D.R.E.A.M.S. to not only Pascagoula, but all of Jackson County would be a great idea."

Brooks is hosting a Black Tie Gala, Saturday, June 9, 2016 at the Hilton Garden Inn in Pascagoula from 6 p.m.- 9 p.m. For tickets or other information, Brooks can be reached at ShaudellBrooks@gmail.com.

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