

Dodgeville student to perform lead role in "Hairspray"

By: Kasi Greenwood

"All the world's a stage" for Leah Johnson, a sophomore this year at Dodgeville High School.

Musical Theater has been a major portion of Johnson's life. From the time she was very little, she has shared in many singing sessions with her Uncle Dave and cousin Matty Olson.

Singing has also allowed her to perform the National Anthem throughout the years for baseball and basketball games, and even for Hollandale Home Talent Baseball Team when they made the league playoffs a few seasons ago. She has also been very involved with Dodgeville Middle and High School choirs.

It was in third grade where her passion for musical theater began, thanks to Prairie Fire Children's Theater. Since eighth grade, she has been active in Children's Theater in Madison (CTM), through which she has participated in three-week acting camps that are held at the Overture Center in Madison.

Her venture in acting continued through Verona Area Community Theater (VACT) where she has been recently rehearsing "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Her experiences have set the stage for being cast in a dream role.

Johnson has just landed the part of Tracy Turnblad in "Hairspray," a very popular musical production.

For those unfamiliar with the musical, "Hairspray" takes place in Baltimore in 1962. Tracy Turnblad is an overweight high school student who dreams of being on The Corny Collins Show, Baltimore's teenage dance show. After learning that one of the show's dancers is taking a leave of absence, Tracy jumps at the opportunity for an audition. Unfortunately, due to her unique shape and close-mindedness from cast members of the show, she is

turned away.

Refusing to give up, Tracy's singing and dancing catches the attention of both Corny Collins and teen heartthrob Link Larkin, winning her a spot as a regular on the show.

Despite Tracy's triumph by being on the show, segregation is still a major concern. Only once a month can African-Americans "smile and dance" on the show. "Hairspray" follows Tracy's mission in opening Baltimore's eyes towards integration and the idea that "having an open mind is a good mind."

Johnson's journey as Tracy Turnblad began during her rehearsals for "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," after her conversation with the director at VACT. The director (who is also a director for "Hairspray") came forward to the cast during rehearsals about trying out for "Hairspray." Johnson has always been a big fan of the show, and for that reason, she decided to audition.

It was a Saturday in December and with registration, vocal auditions and ultimately a callback, it became a full day's work deciding cast member roles. After auditions concluded, it was announced that results for the cast list would not be up until Monday morning. However, after rigorous decision making, results for the cast list came out late Sunday night.

Sheri, Leah's mother, woke up early Sunday morning and found the results on VACT's Facebook page. Sheri allowed her daughter to sleep in after a long day of auditions. After Leah woke, Sheri had her daughter check VACT's Facebook page on her phone, not being able to contain her excitement for much longer. After viewing the page, Johnson received the news that gave her the dream role of a lifetime.

When Johnson found out that

she had been cast as the lead role, many emotions went through her mind.

"She looked like she was three again. There were big crocodile tears," Johnson's mother recalled.

"Actually getting to be able to be in their teenage show first of all, then getting the lead part was so crazy and surreal," Johnson said with sheer joy.

Johnson dissected many of the great qualities of "Hairspray's" protagonist and why she was so drawn to Tracy Turnblad.

"She's so inclusive of everyone," Johnson said. "She doesn't really understand why people keep everyone separate. It's her working to integrate the show that is so cool and her being so accepting of everyone, I love it!"

Johnson even described parallels between "Hairspray" and the similarity with today's current events.

"Everything in the show is so relevant right now," Johnson said. "Body image and so many racist things going on now. Bringing this show and doing it, I've read the script and there are so many things I've seen. Online you see all this stuff and I hate it. Working as Tracy, her integrating the show, I want to help integrate everything. It's important to keep everyone accepted in everything."

Through the many years in musical theater, Johnson has discovered that social interaction has become a major component of her life.

"I used to not want to reach out and talk to people," said Johnson. "I didn't want to make the effort to get to know people. Now I meet someone, and I automatically want to know more about them. Making connections is so important to me."

Johnson advised to those interested in musical theater that simply starting is the best way to begin.

"It doesn't matter how old you are, just start," Johnson said. "If you have an interest, just start. It's so much fun and everyone involved in any show is so accepting and so encouraging. Get online and find something. There's always something going on. It's the best thing I've been a part of, and I love it so much."

It is safe to say that musical theater will continue being a big part of her life. She has three other shows coming up in the summer, spring, and fall.

She plans to stay involved in Musical Theater after high school and will study it at the next level. The schools she feels will help her do this include UW-Stevens Point, University of Michigan, and even NYU Tisch School of the Arts. It will depend on which path of theater she will take, however theater it will very likely be.

The list of people to thank is quite long for Johnson. That list includes her family, her friends through school and plays, the many directors and music teachers of Dodgeville School District, VACT, CTM, Prairie Fire Children's theater, and so many more. Without their support Johnson is uncertain where she would be today.

The teenage adaptation of the production will be presented through VACT in late April. Johnson will keep audiences singing and dancing on April 26, and April 28, both of which are 7 p.m. performances, of this year.



Leah Johnson in Prairie Fire Children's Theater as the lead role in "Cinderella".



On far right, Johnson in Children's Theater of Madison's production of "Urinetown".



On far left, Johnson in Children's Theater of Madison's production of "Curtains".



Johnson in Dodgeville High School's production of "Leader of the Pack".