



Although only 18 years old, Jessica Watson, who is both Lebanon Area and Pennsylvania Runner-Up Fair Queen, excels in music, drama, dance, and leadership. Through her parents' persistent training, Jessica said that she learned to channel her boundless energy sometimes labeled "hyper-activity" into positive outlets.



Personalities and learning styles vary among the sisters, but they share much the same interests and say they are best friends. Jessica, right, and her oldest sister Joyce, who was at work when this picture was taken, co-direct the Joyful Noise, a traveling group composed of about 50 inter-city youth who incorporate music, drama, and dance in programs. Jennifer, center, and Jacqueline, left, assist their sisters in the Joyful Noise and in providing peer leadership in the Youth For Christ organization.

Home With The Watson Family

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(Lebanon Co.)—The name Jessica Watson keeps popping up in the news: Lebanon Fair Queen, Pennsylvania Alternate Fair Queen, numerous speech and essay awards, soloist, actress, model. . .

In 18 years, Jessica has packed a wallop of achievements into her life. Her vibrant energy and enthusiasm is contagious to those around her.

Jessica exhibited an abundance of energy ever since her birth. Parents Jeff and Laura-Jean Watson tell how Jessica at six months pushed her toys into a heap in order to crawl out of the playpen. Family friends labeled Jessica hyperactive. Her parents considered it a challenge to channel Jessica's energy into positive outlets.

"I found that she learns differently than our other three daughters," Laura-Jean said. "She's right brain dominant."

Always a social butterfly, Jessica quickly endeared herself to her kindergarten teacher. But social skills can't atone for lack of scholastic ability. By the end of her kindergarten year, Jessica had not mastered the alphabet.

Although not schooled in teaching, Laura-Jean had read that children learn best by involving all five senses. She thought up original ways to have Jessica learn the alphabet by tracing letters with her fingers and saying them aloud. "This included her sense of touch, hearing, and seeing," Mrs. Watson said.

Within three days Jessica had mastered the alphabet.

Convinced that Jessica could learn if she were taught differently than traditional methods, her mother campaigned to homeschool her for one year.

Eighteen years ago, homeschooling was rare and frowned upon. Even Jessica's dad was skeptical but both he and the

school agreed to give home schooling a one-year trial period.

When Jessica rejoined her class the following year, her reading skills were above all her classmates. But the classroom was a turbulent battleground involving a frustrated teacher and many out-of-control students. Easily distracted by the commotion, Jessica lagged behind until by the third grade her achievement scores were actually lower than those tested the previous year.

Alarmed, her parents believed they had no choice but to homeschool.

"I have a lot of respect for teachers. Joyce, our oldest daughter, did great in the classroom," Laura-Jean said. "But each child is different. And we need to do what is best for the child."

Laura-Jean read profusely, looking for teaching methods that she could adapt in tutoring Jessica.

Although Jessica had 20/20 vision, in-depth testing by an ophthalmologist showed that Jessica's eyes did not function together. In addition, her eyes did not refocus when she glanced from her desk to the chalkboard.

Vision therapy improved Jessica's focusing ability. But it didn't correct the whole problem.

Jessica is very imaginative. Just mentioning concepts such as "it's snowing ice cream" sent her mind spinning in all directions and made it difficult for her to concentrate on the task at hand.

Her mother realized that the more senses involved in learning, the easier it was for Jessica to learn. Jessica also had to learn to discipline herself to concentrate and not become distracted.

Persistence paid off. Within the first year, Jessica completed curriculum for two years. She excelled in science and history, but needed to study harder to grasp math concepts.

"The neat thing about home schooling is that you can work on a subject you like all day, but just do

the minimal requirements on a subject you don't enjoy as much," Jessica said.

As her younger sisters Jennifer and Jacqueline watched Jessica work on her lessons, they too wanted to be home-schooled. Meanwhile, the Watson's eldest daughter continued to excel in the classroom but begged also to be home-schooled.

Her parents pushed off her requests until 10th grade when she

commented that her parents didn't love her as much as her sisters because they didn't homeschool her.

"That did it," Laura-Jean said. In a role as both mother and teacher, Laura-Jean often told her daughters, "The most important thing is to do your best—not necessarily to get an A."

She recalled how easy it was for Joyce to earn A's in the public school without really doing her

best. "Teachers didn't really know what she was capable of doing," said her mother, who recalls that one time she asked Joyce to improve a research paper that had been an A to an A+.

Laura-Jean searched for curriculum to benefit the learning styles of each daughter.

"We seldom reused the same curriculum because what seemed best for one wasn't necessarily the best for the other," Laura-Jean said.

As mother and teacher, she said it was important to differentiate between laziness and actual frustration.

"Dad is a great history teacher," Jessica said. "He remembers dates, names, places—I don't know how he does it."

"And he taught us science. We live across from Middle Creek (Wildlife Management System), and he takes us for walks and tells us the name of every flower and plant."

The Watsons live modestly. Laura-Jean is a full-time mother and Jeff works for a seed company. The Watsons teach their children that if God wants them to do something, he will provide the finances. They do not believe in incurring debt—not even for college.

"So many people have car and college debts that they aren't free to do what they want and feel they should do," Laura-Jean said.

They have instilled this belief into the children at a young age.

When Joyce was six years old and Jessica, two, they began taking dance lessons paid for by their grandmother.

When her grandmother no longer paid for the lessons, Jessica paid for them herself by working at cleaning jobs. Now she teaches dance to preschoolers at classes held at ABC Day Care and at Universal Fitness and Racquet Center.

"I think I have a greater understanding and patience with pre-



For Jeff Watson, being a dad of Jessica means serving as teacher, supporter, and even escort like at this event when she was crowned Pennsylvania's Runner-Up State Fair Queen. As fair queen, Jessica encourages youth participation in community fairs. These and other pageants are also a great source of scholarship money for her.