

BELLARMINE

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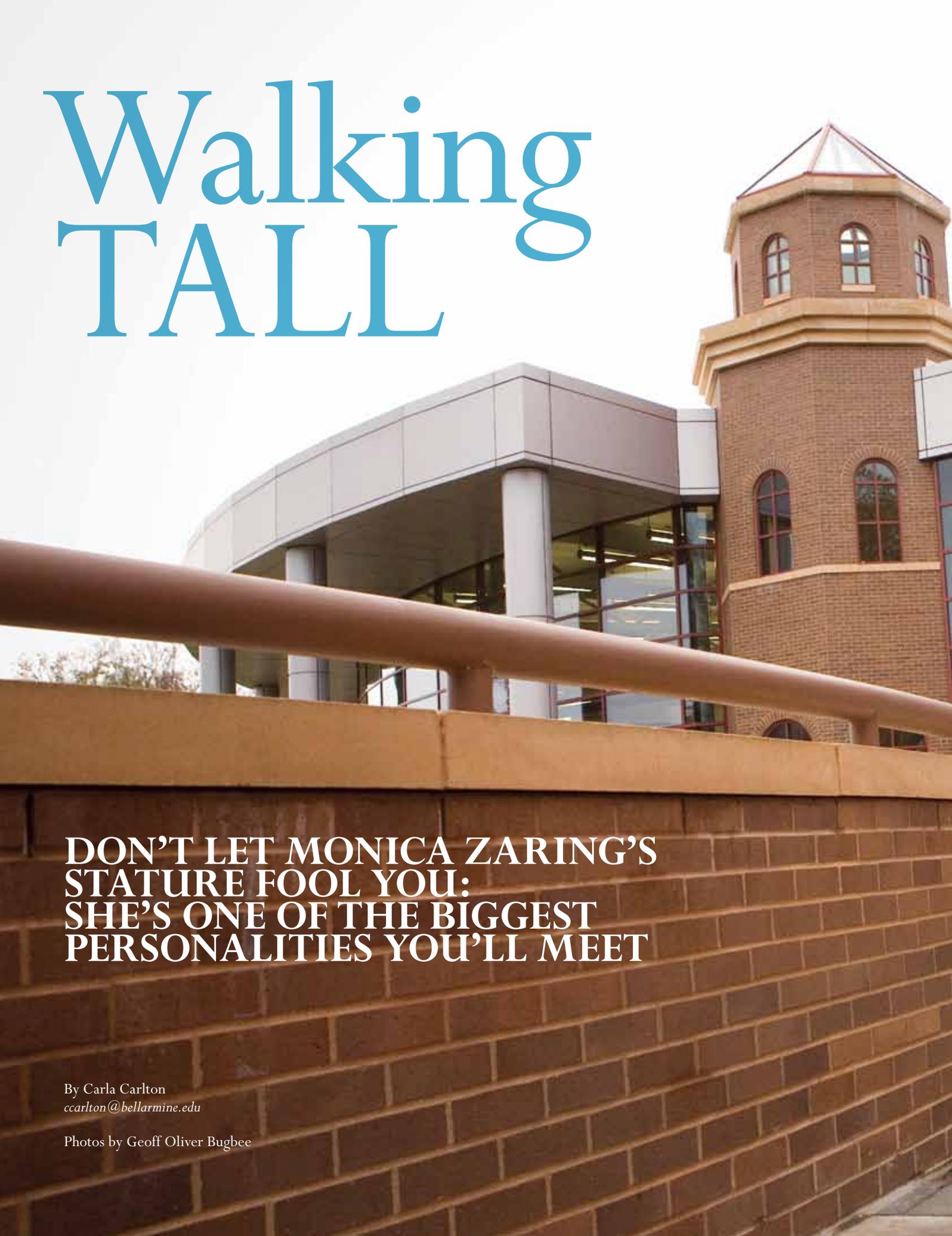
WINTER 2012

Monica Zaring
is a success,
no matter how
you measure it

Walking Tall

A SNAPSHOT OF DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS | Q&A WITH SCOTT WIEGANDT

Walking TALL

A photograph of a brick building with a tower and a walkway railing in the foreground. The building has a modern design with a curved section and a brick tower with arched windows. The walkway railing is in the foreground, and the brick wall is in the lower foreground.

**DON'T LET MONICA ZARING'S
STATURE FOOL YOU:
SHE'S ONE OF THE BIGGEST
PERSONALITIES YOU'LL MEET**

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Photos by Geoff Oliver Bugbee



WHEN MONICA ZARING WAS VERY YOUNG, she says, a series of doctors issued a series of grim predictions for her future: “I wouldn’t live more than a week. I wouldn’t make it to this or that age. College was out of the question.”

Medical establishment, meet Monica Zaring, Bellarmine University Class of 2011.

Ultimately diagnosed with a form of dwarfism so rare that only eight other people in the entire world have it, Monica is now 23 and quite accustomed to defying expectations.

She attended Sacred Heart Academy, where she was named one of Metro Louisville’s Outstanding High School Seniors of 2006 and elected prom queen. Like many college students, she has a part-time job, working as a cashier at the Crestwood, Ky., Goodwill. And last month, she was scheduled to walk across the stage in Knights Hall and receive her degree in communications – wearing a graduation gown custom-made to fit her 3-foot, 5-inch frame.

That’s not to say that her life has been easy. Her condition, osteodysplastic microcephalic dysplasia, has necessitated 14 surgeries, including operations to correct clubbed feet and cataracts, and she has the bone density of a 70-year-old. In December 2010, she underwent a complete shoulder replacement that delayed her graduation by six months, and now she needs a hip replacement. Pain, if not a constant companion, is a frequent visitor.

But “if she feels sorry for herself, I’ve never seen it,” says Dr. Dave Pariser, an assistant professor of physical therapy. Dr. Pariser oversees Monica’s care in Bellarmine’s Service Learning Clinic, and he and his wife, Dr. Gina Pariser, who live next door to Monica’s aunt in Crestwood, have driven her to and from campus. (Monica, who lives with her parents just over the Oldham County line in Shelby County, drives a specially equipped Ford Focus but doesn’t like highways.) “A sense of humor can get you through a lot of tough spots in life, and she’s a perfect example of that.”

It may be Monica’s unusual stature that initially draws attention, but it’s her relentlessly upbeat attitude – she estimates she has “maybe three” bad days a year – that really distinguishes her from most people. Asked if she considers herself an inspiration, she quickly says, “Yeah,”

then giggles. “I don’t mean to be full of myself, but I’ve had people tell me that I’m an inspiration, that I always have a smile on my face,” she elaborates. “That’s pretty much how I live my life. I never think, ‘Why me?’ or anything like that. That’s just not my frame of mind.”

“Whenever you need things put into perspective, she’s a good one to talk to,” Dave Pariser says. “She’s probably had more life challenges condensed into 23 years than a lot of people face in 70, and she always manages to come through it smiling.”

‘DWELL ON THE BLESSINGS’

Monica credits her family for pushing her to achieve. “Basically,” she says, “they never told me I couldn’t.”

The youngest child of Gene and Margie Zaring, she has three brothers and a sister, Megan, who is a 2004 Bellarmine graduate. There were no indications before Monica was born that anything was amiss; her birth weight of 5 pounds, 9 ounces was lower than her siblings’, but not low enough to cause alarm.

Margie Zaring, a speech therapist who graduated from Bellarmine in 1976 and has a master’s in special education, came at the situation academically. “I had to set the tone. There would be differences, but everyone was to have high expectations for Monica. We were going to figure out how to do this.”

Monica tells a story about when she was in first grade. “My mom always made a point to tell the teachers she didn’t want me limited from anything. She was like, ‘Monica might have to do it differently, but she can do it.’ But one day, she stopped by school to check on me. She said I was sitting in the classroom during recess coloring because the teacher was afraid to let me go out. And Mom was like, ‘No, I would rather have you call me and tell me that she got hurt because she was out there on the playground having fun and living life.’ They’ve always enforced that kind of idea,” she says, wiping away a rare tear. “They’ve always treated me like one of the other kids.”

Meanwhile, Margie Zaring was constantly reading books and articles – “you couldn’t look on the Internet then” – to try to figure out what she was dealing with. “I’m a special educator – you look for the diagnosis and then you remediate. For years, I was after that diagnosis.



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For years, that was my mission. But one doctor finally said, ‘There is no diagnosis for this. Just do what you’re doing – it seems to be working.’”

That included guiding all of her children in how to respond gracefully when people stared at them in public. “I used to tell Monica, ‘They can’t figure you out. They hear you talking so well to me – you look 2, but you’re 8. Give them your age, give them somewhere to start.’ I’d say, ‘This is my little girl,’ and she’d say, ‘I’m 7!’ Parents would be horrified that their children had been staring, but she’d say, ‘I’ll bet you’re wondering about me. Do you remember “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”?’ And she’d put them at ease.”

Monica still appreciates it when parents take the time to engage her in a conversation about her stature, rather than jerking their children away. “Any time she can use her condition to raise public awareness for tolerance, she just relishes that,” says Dr. Pariser.

But don’t be mistaken: She does not define herself by her condition. She recalled being interviewed by a fellow student for an assignment in one of their communication classes. “She was like, ‘What’s the correct terminology? What do you like to be called?’ And I said, ‘I like to be called Monica.’” (For the record, the preferred terms are little person, person with dwarfism or person with short stature.)

After several scares, including being told when Monica was 4 that she wouldn’t live out the week, doctors eventually settled on a diagnosis of osteodysplastic microcephalic dysplasia when she was 6. But while Monica does share many characteristics with the few other people who have her condition, there are differences. Most of the others have cognitive challenges, for instance.

“From early on,” Margie Zaring said, “they told us to expect a mental handicap. Then they said there would be physical disabilities. And then at 7, the doctor said, ‘You know what? She’s not going to be any of those.’”

“She has to work. She has to study. She’s learned that she might have to get extra help. But that’s OK; there are a lot of students who work their way through that. We dwell on the blessings, not the obstacles.”

Until last January, Monica thought she was the only woman with her condition. “After 20 years, I had pretty much given up on finding someone like me.” But one day,

as she was researching her bone issues on Google, “her YouTube account comes up. Of all things: YouTube!” With her mother’s encouragement, she contacted the other woman, who lives in Washington State. They met this past summer at a little people convention in Anaheim, Calif., “and we’ve been texting and stuff,” said Monica. She signs all of her texts “Little bit.”

‘SHE ALWAYS FINDS A WAY’

It’s a drizzly Wednesday morning in Crestwood, but business is steady at the Goodwill store. Monica stands on a low step stool behind the cash register; a taller stool next to her allows her to reach the credit-card machine. On the wall behind her are framed stories about her clipped from local newspapers and magazines.

A customer wheels her cart up. “How was your trip to California?” she asks Monica, who responds that it was great. “Well, you’re always so upbeat, you couldn’t have a bad time anywhere,” the woman says.

An older gentleman walks up and Monica introduces him as Scott Berry, one of the store’s assistant managers. “That’s right – I’m a small fry,” he says self-deprecatingly.

Monica quickly corrects him: “No – *I’m* the small fry.” They both laugh.

When Monica first started working at Goodwill, Scott says, he worried that she wouldn’t be physically able to handle the job. “But she always finds a way,” he said. “She’s awesome. She’s always here, on time, if not early. She runs errands for me that she doesn’t have to do, but she’s kind-hearted and does them. She’ll go to the bank to get change for us.”

Customers look out for her; they often help her bag up their items, especially after her shoulder surgery. “They’ll say, ‘Don’t lift that! Let me get that!’” she says.

That’s what happens when one of her regular customers brings a big stack of jeans and shirts and two winter coats to the counter. After ringing up the sale, Monica hangs a plastic bag on a hook, hops off the stool and starts stuffing the clothing in. The bag gets larger and larger. “It’s bigger than me!” Monica says. “I think I went overboard,” the woman says, lifting it into her cart.

“I have a lot of customers who say they come in just to see me,” Monica says. “They’ll say, ‘You make us laugh, you always have a smile on your face.’ It’s just



good to come in here and have that kind of atmosphere. They say, ‘You’re not going to leave us now, are you?’ I don’t know.”

Her goal is to get a job doing website development and management, something she became interested in at Sacred Heart, where she took every computer class offered. “She is amazing at the computer – she has excellent skills,” Margie Zaring says.

To fulfill her Bellarmine internship requirement, Monica improved the national website of the Dream Factory, a Louisville-based non-profit that grants the dreams of children with critical or chronic illnesses and that, when she was 8, sent Monica and her entire family to Disney World. She attended the organization’s annual parties for recipients until she was 18, when she and her mother decided they should start giving back. Now, each year Monica builds a database of the children who will be attending so they will have age-appropriate gifts in their stockings. And she still attends the party, too – dressed as an elf.

Dressing for future job interviews is another matter. Finding professional-looking clothing is difficult when you’re a size 6 in the children’s department. “What looks cute on a 6-year-old isn’t cute on a 23-year-old,” she says. And forget anything frilly or sparkly. “I mean, I already look like a 5-year-old; I don’t need to give anyone more reason to think I’m a 5-year-old!”

“Everyone was to have high expectations for Monica.” — Margie Zaring, Monica’s mom

‘A MATURE PERSPECTIVE’

Before she gets too invested in job opportunities, Monica has another medical issue to resolve. Her right hip is beginning to deteriorate in much the same way as her right shoulder did. One morning in 2010, she woke up unable to move her arm. Doctors soon determined she needed a complete shoulder replacement. But in performing a surgery on such a small scale, “we were in uncharted waters,” said Dr. Ryan Krupp, an orthopedic surgeon at Norton Healthcare who specializes in complex shoulder reconstruction.

What was clear was that if something wasn’t done soon, “she would have no options,” he said. The cartilage had worn away, and the bone was starting to erode.

Dr. Krupp worked with a company in Warsaw, Ind., to design and manufacture a custom joint and custom instruments to install it. “The outcome was good, and she’s doing well,” he said. “When you go into medicine, you do it to help people. This is exactly what I went into this for.” With her bubbly personality and positive outlook, he said, “you can’t help but love her. She makes it easy to want to help her.”

Because her bones are too weak right now to hold an artificial hip joint, Monica has decided to try a drug treatment designed to build the bone up so a replacement can be done. Even if the injection works, a replacement is at least a year away, and insurance won’t pay for it. Talking about the situation is the only time she seems even slightly downcast.

“I call it practical thinking. I don’t want to land a perfect job and then have to take time off. I don’t think a lot of students think like that when they first get out, but I’m very aware that something might happen.”

It’s ironic, Dr. Pariser says: “For somebody who looks so childlike, she has such a mature perspective on life.”

To regain a full range of motion following the shoulder replacement, and now to help manage her hip pain, Monica regularly visits the Service Learning Clinic. Working with her is a unique opportunity for physical therapy students, Dr. Pariser says. “It’s not that common to work with someone who’s had a shoulder replacement anyway, and then you put on top of it her diagnosis and the custom prosthesis that she had to have made and all the precautions that go with that.”

Despite the fact that she is often in pain, she still puts the students at ease with her sense of humor. “You can’t break it – it’s already broken,” she remembers telling one nervous student working with her shoulder for the first time.

“People teach in different ways, and I think Monica teaches us a lot about ourselves in the way that we view her and the way that she views herself,” Dr. Pariser says. “I just think she has a real gift. It’s been a real privilege for us to be associated with her.”

Then he laughs. “Now, I don’t want her to hear that,” he says affectionately. “She’ll get a big head.” ■