

Written by By FAITH HUFFMAN, News-Telegram News Editor
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Juggling is an adroit balancing of multiple elements, a feat not all accomplish with finesse. Katelyn McDonald does it with aplomb. In fact, she's a pro at it.

The Sulphur Bluff High School senior, like many students in small schools, has participated in many activities. She likely would have had a larger selection of activities to choose from had she attended a larger school in a bigger town, but she would have had to do just that — choose only a few activities to participate in.

One of the advantages of attending a small school is that staff are aware of other clubs and sponsors' activities and try to adjust their schedules accordingly to avoid conflicts for the students who choose to be involved in more than one activity, McDonald notes.

At school, McDonald has participated in sports — basketball, volleyball, softball and even track as a freshman; Family, Career and Community Leaders of America; Beta Club; and academic UIL and One-Act Play competitions. Outside of school, she's also been very active in 4-H. She's also managed to maintain As and Bs in her classes, prepared for various projects, held several leadership positions, helped with several community service projects and found time to give blood too. This year, she's added senior activities in place of sports and, over the summer had fun competing in the Hopkins County Dairy Festival Queen Pageant.



Those extra-curricular experiences have helped McDonald to achieve many successes and molded her into a caring, well spoken, civic-minded successful young leader, characteristics she hopes will lend themselves to her future.

After graduating SBHS this spring, she plans to begin pursuing a career in physical therapy by

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getting her basics out of the way at Paris Junior College, then transitioning to a university to in her chosen field.

“I was going to do massage therapy, but physical therapy is more about helping others. I like being helpful,” said McDonald, who knows personally what it’s like to be the patient; she had to have PT after injuring herself playing basketball in 8th grade.

Billy Branch, a volunteer and certified rifle person for 4-H shooting sports, says helping is characteristic of Katelyn McDonald’s general nature. Her willingness to pitch in and help out when there’s a need, often without being asked, distinguishes her.

“She’s held several offices in 4-H and comes from a family of 4-H members and leaders,” said Dr. Mario Villarino, Hopkins County Extension agent who oversees the county’s 4-H programs along with fellow Extension agent Johanna Hicks. “She’s a happy person all the time. We are her 4-H family. Katelyn and her mom are always out helping the county. They lead Dike 4-H Club. She’s environmentally conscience, attentive to the elderly. She’s strong, super neat ... talented, does whatever we ask her to do as part of 4-H, a very confident person.”

“She’s super, wonderful. She comes from a good family. She’s focused on what she wants to do and is very confident, if somewhat reserved. Very talented — I didn’t know she could play piano ‘til the Dairy Fest pageant. She knows what she is doing, a sweet person,” Branch added.

McDonald credits 4-H and FCCLA for helping to develop her public speaking abilities, leadership skills and creativity.

She has been a member of Dike 4-H Club for 10 years, but has been steeped in the program since since she was little more than a toddler.

“When I was 18 months old, my mom was nominated Dike 4-H Club manager,” said McDonald, adding that 4-H has been a family affair. Her older sisters were involved in 4-H, hence her mom being named an adult leader; she and her younger brother, Wesley are current members and her mom continues to have a leadership role with Dike 4-H Club.

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4-H has allowed McDonald to develop her creative side, participating in fashion, food and photography projects and contests. She's also participated in archery, been to multi-county camps and team camps, and served as club leader, including president for two years.

She also won the four 4-H awards of distinction, including becoming a recipient of the gold star as an eighth grader — which is “kind of young” to receive the honor. McDonald also represented her club as a district 4-H official too.

McDonald admits that when she first sought and was selected for the club and district offices, she wasn't quite sure what she was doing, but with a little guidance learned to embrace and enjoy the role.

“It's been a big deal. It's helped me through public speaking. If not for 4-H, I would not be a public speaker. Public speaking is a 4-H event. It brought me out of my shell and allowed me to speak in FCCLA. With FCCLA, I've had to speak in front of a 1,000 people,” she said.

Katelyn says she was inspired by older sister Elizabeth to become involved in and run for a regional office in FCCLA.

“I ran for a regional office. I followed in her footsteps. When Elizabeth got to go, I got to convention, I got to go too. When I was younger, I got to go to the regional meet [with Elizabeth and her mom],” Katelyn recalled.

She said being a club officer is a great leadership development tool, as well as a team building and networking skill builder.

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She's served in various chapter and regional FCCLA officer positions, including regional competitive events officer and been involved in parliamentary law.

Utilizing the speaking skills she developed talking at various 4-H and FCCLA conferences competing in UIL persuasive and impromptu speaking events since junior high, McDonald and other officers helped change the chapter dress code so that SBHS members would put forth a more professional image.



As a regional officer, she helped put on the fall leadership workshop, complete with LEO tests and leadership workshops. One of her biggest challenges was finding judges for competitive events.

"You have to find someone to chair each event, mostly chapter advisors. You contact them and asked, 'Can you chair this event?'" McDonald noted.

When the list of advisors didn't yield the results she'd hoped for, McDonald was able to contact her regional advisor, who was able to offer some tips and alternate suggestions.

"I'm sure I'll land back here some to be a judge, too. FCCLA helped me a lot. I put my high school career into it," she said. Parliamentary law was easier. It was fun. I could bring out my creativity."

This weekend, she's at the regional FCCLA contest competing in the life event planning STAR event contest. For it, she's planned her own graduation party, following the requirements to compare the items she plans to buy with the other possible options, and show her entire plan.

"It's a whole lot different from being an officer. It's harder than being an officer. But, with this, I

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got to bring out my creativity,” she said in an interview Thursday. “It’s different than anything I’ve done.”

McDonald’s table center piece is a clear gallon jar lined with a range of photos of her from baby pictures to more recent pictures, and ribbon “flowers” sprouting out the top of the jar with “Kate 2014” on them. Her invitations are black paper graduation caps with the pertinent information on white paper and a blue and white tassel pinned on them. She plans to use Mason jars as cups, with lids on them, a tassel on the side and a hole cut in the top of the lid and grouted in to provide a straw “with no leaks.” Pricing them, she figured out that she can make them for less than \$2 or can get them pre-made for \$16. She’ll be making them herself.



“I get my creativity from my mom. She’s very creative,” McDonald credited. “We always have a graduation party. We had a party from eight grade and now,” McDonald explained, adding that she decided to depart from the norm for a more formal graduation party complete with table settings and centerpiece.

Katelyn said she got her piano-playing ability, which she utilized for the talent portion of the 2013 HC Dairy Festival, from mom too, but shrugs off too much praise for her piano skills.

“It’s a talent I did when I was little. It ended in junior high when I picked up sports. Mom knows how to play. Monty Flippin teaches here. Mom helped us. She plays by ear. It was different doing the monologue intro to the piano piece for the Dairy Festival. I got to play on the grand piano,” she smiled jubilantly.

Aside from her many competitive and club speaking events, McDonald also has experience with productions. She was part of the 10-member Beta Club team that won top honors at state last year for their character skit, then had the honor of performing it at the national Beta convention over the summer to show clubs from other states how skits can effectively become part of national competitions. Due in part to the SB Beta Club’s skit performance at nationals, Beta organization made skit a national Beta competition this year. McDonald is among the 22-SB Beta Club members advancing from state to nationals after placing third in character skit and second in scrap-booking this January. (SB Beta Club is having a stew this Sunday afternoon at

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SB Community Center, accepting donations to help raise the needed funds to send all 22 Beta members to nationals in June.)

“This will be my third year to go with Beta to national. With FCCLA, I’ve only been to state so far,” said McDonald, acknowledging her participation in Beta and basketball are owed to her sister Jennifer, who is now married and mom to a 1-year-old; she’s just following in Jennifer’s footsteps.

Katelyn McDonald is also the stage manager for SBHS theater department’s current production, the comical French “who done it” murder farce “The Attempted Murder of Peggy Sweetwater.” They’ll perform March 19 at the One-Act Play Zone competition. Last year, the One-Act Play she was part of advanced to the area contest.



McDonald credits her mom and the support of the always encouraging Janie “Mrs. V” Vandiver for keeping her on track.

“Mrs. V and my mom are the two main people who, if I ask, will help me in any way they can. My mom drives me everywhere. She’s been there for us [Katelyn and her three siblings],” she said.

The work ethic of both of her parents — dad Ramond, who puts in many long hours as lead mechanic in charge of keeping all the trucks in good working order at Sanitation Solutions in Paris, and her mom, SB pre-kindergarten aide Margaret McDonald, — is apparent in McDonald’s dedication to all of her activities, which she admits is sometimes a bit of a juggling act. Her phone calendar helps her keep track of where she’s supposed to be when, but her mom has been key to her time management.

Graduation from SBHS will be “neat” in that it offers another “different” small school experience. Katelyn McDonald and her brother Wesley will graduate at the same time, Wesley from eighth

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grade and Katelyn from high school.

“I’ve enjoyed it. I hope I’ve left a good impression, that I was raised well and that each person in the school and community helped in some way to mold me as I am today,” McDonald said of her formative years at the Bluff and growing up in Dike.