Student with Down Syndrome told she would never talk gives first public speaking address at national education conference

Olivia’s impressive oratory

By Emilie Ng

OLIVIA Hargroder is a self-confessed “chatterbox”, but she was never expected to learn to speak.

Born with Down Syndrome, the 16-year-old underwent major heart surgery and was not expected to live.

“My mum and dad couldn’t even cuddle me,” Olivia said.

“So they stayed by my side reading books.”

The books helped and Olivia made a full recovery.

Parents Kerry and Mark Hargroder, who are parishioners at Holy Cross, Kippa-Ring, learnt sign language to communicate with Olivia.

By the time she was one, she knew “about 100 signs and even some words”.

“When I was born, because I had Down Syndrome, I would never learn to speak, but I turned out to be a chatterbox.”

A month after the doctor’s original prognosis, Olivia took centre stage at her first speaking engagement at a national education conference last week “to teach the teachers” about how to treat children with Down Syndrome.

The “Expect the Best” conference, organised by non-profit organisation Down Syndrome Association Queensland, provided teachers with resources and tools for educating children with DS.

Olivia told teachers “to have high expectations” of students with Down Syndrome.

Mum Kerry Hargroder said only one kindergarten teacher had seen Olivia go, believing Down Syndrome children were “always a problem”.

“Yes it was a problem, but the problem was I was the one who could already read,” Olivia said.

Positivity comes naturally to Olivia, who believes children “are born optimistic”, but also enthusiasm for life.

She qualified for the 2012 Special Olympics’ swimming squad, took up work experience at the Dolphin’s League Club last year, and completed an acting course with NIDA in Brisbane over the Christmas holidays.

Her high-achieving attitude has inspired many at her school, St Francis Xavier Catholic College, in particular business teacher Kevin O’Dwyer, who travelled from Scarborough to hear Olivia’s speech.

“It was motivating for me as a teacher because Olivia shows us that even kids with Down Syndrome can achieve anything they put their minds to,” Mr O’Dwyer said.

“She is very bright in business and her reading and writing levels are exceptional.”

Mrs Hargroder also felt proud watching her daughter’s first speaking gig.

“She was there on a mission to teach teachers,” she said.

The mother of three said he and husband Mark Hargroder prayed baby Olivia would survive.

“Every day with Olivia is a bonus because she was never expected to survive,” Mrs Hargroder said.

“She’s battled from the start but she’s always won through.”

Olivia hopes to own her own cafe and employ people with disabilities, especially those with Down Syndrome.

“I just love helping people with Down Syndrome,” she said.

She is also pursuing an acting career, following the footsteps of her sister.

Her lifelong dream would be an acting job alongside her idol, UK actress Dani Harmer.

“Dani Harmer, if you’re (reading this), make sure you say hi to your agent for me,” she said.