



# NEWS

## **Determination and focus help two cousins achieve their dreams Olympian Molly Schaus and Friedreich's ataxia patient Bridget Downing-cousins and dreamers**

They share the same birthday and the same family genes; yet these cousins each have a very different story. One is the recent winner of Silver in the Sochi Winter Olympics and the other battles a rare, genetic disease that has robbed her of her ability to walk.

The odds of an athlete winning an Olympic medal are rare, and it is an incredible feat that requires a triumph of will. Another rarity is the odds of receiving a diagnosis of Friedreich's ataxia (FA), a life shortening, and degenerative neuro-muscular disorder that affects about one in 50,000 people in the United States. Cousins Molly Schaus, goalie for the US Women's Hockey Team who is returning home from the Winter Olympics, and Bridget Downing, a teacher in South Carolina, are living proof that each of these rarities can happen, even in the same family.

Molly Schaus just won her second silver medal for the USA Women's Hockey team at the Sochi Olympics last week. A lover of all things sports since childhood, Schaus knows a thing or two about hard work, determination, and never giving up.

Her cousin Bridget Downing has an equally inspirational, yet entirely different story. She was diagnosed with FA at 10 years old, but has never let the symptoms of her disease stop her from pursuing life with passion. Downing knew she wanted to be a teacher ever since she was a kid, and now she is working hard and living her dream as a kindergarten teacher in South Carolina.

Growing up, the cousins would visit and celebrate birthdays together. The parties were always fun, but presented some challenges for Downing, who suffered from leg pains. Even when she couldn't play sports because of FA, she never let herself be left out.

"I used to line up my dolls and have them join me as spectators watching Molly and our brothers play," Downing said. She has always been a huge supporter of her cousin's success, proudly wearing the Team USA Olympic gear to celebrate.

"Even though our interests differed as kids, I have always looked up to Bridget as an inspiration and role model. Bridget shares the same passion, dedication and love for life and teaching as I do for hockey, and I am so proud of what she has overcome to accomplish her goals," says Schaus.

However different their lives may be, the cousins do each face unique challenges: Schaus has to train, compete and overcome obstacles to be as good as she is in her career. Last year, she lost her father, who was one of her biggest supporters. Now she finds strength in her mom and brothers, and her teammates at USA Hockey.

Downing's challenges are in the fight to find a cure for FA, as well as the daily challenges of living with the disease. When she was in high school, her disease progressed to a point that she could no longer walk on her own. Now she relies on a Segway to help her stay mobile while living and teaching in Charleston. Downing also recently started participating in a new clinical trial for FA research and travels from South Carolina to Florida for the study.

Downing comes by her determination naturally. Upon receiving their daughter's diagnosis, rather than be defeated, her parents started fundraising and became Founding Board Directors of the Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance (FARA)- a nonprofit organization that funds and facilitates research for FA.

For both an Olympian and a rare disease survivor, triumph is the goal. Schaus and Downing share this goal and help each other strive to achieve it. Both girls are fiercely dedicated to their dreams, both girls are fighters, and both girls are firm believers in never giving up.

### **About Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance**

The Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance (FARA) is a national, public, 501(c)(3), non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to curing Friedreich's ataxia (FA) through research. FARA grants and activities provide support for basic and translational FA research, pharmaceutical/ biotech drug development, clinical trials, and scientific conferences. FARA also serves as a catalyst, between the public and scientific community, to create worldwide exchanges of information that drive medical advances. For more information about FARA, visit them online at [www.curefa.org](http://www.curefa.org).