

# Athlete lives his 'I can' motto

## Hard work, positive thinking lead Special Olympics athlete to state Gymnastics Hall of Fame

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Twelve years ago, Carlton Morris was a young gymnast with very little experience and a big fear of heights.

His mother, Mary Morris, recalled standing next to him the first time he stood in a gym and looked up at the rings, a look of discouragement on his face.

"He looked at me and said, 'But I can't,'" she remembered.

But like all champions, Carlton's fear didn't get the best of him. In the intervening 12 years, he has accumulated a seemingly endless string of medals, proof that when he works hard, he can do just about anything.

Saturday brought another watershed moment, as Morris became the first Special Olympics athlete to be inducted into the North Carolina Gymnastics Hall of Fame. He is the only special-needs gymnast so far to have received the honor.

The induction happened in Raleigh, in the middle of the North Raleigh Gymnastics N.C. Men's Qualifier, which brought together 200 gymnasts from around the state. Morris was the Hall of Fame's lone new inductee and received a chance to speak to his fellow athletes.

"I said, 'You have to have a good attitude and do your best,'" he said.

Morris is living proof of what a positive attitude and an honest effort can achieve: Born with Down syndrome, he has for years observed a strict diet to maintain a healthy weight and practices twice weekly with coaches Jill Hunt and Jim Shaw. He's a longtime participant in Special Olympics Davidson County, where he competes in basketball, bowling, cycling and equestrian events in addition to his work in gymnastics.

In 1999, he attended the World Games, where he won five gold medals as well as a silver and a bronze. Seven years later he attended the 2006 National Games in

Ames, Iowa, where he also took home five gold medals, one silver and one bronze.

"It's really been a big adventure for me," Mary said. "To see him go so far, it's been a blessing."

The Hall of Fame ceremony capped an emotional weekend for Carlton, who was surrounded in Raleigh by his family and friends, as well as his coaches and former teachers, all of whom made the drive to see him make history.

He was presented with two plaques commemorating his achievement.

"I am so happy and proud of him for all of his accomplishments," Mary said, adding: "It's not about the competitions he wins, it's more about his spirit, his willingness to do his best and his attitude about life itself."

That attitude has taken him a long way, and Morris shows no signs of slowing. He's already attained the status of level-three national champion; the fourth and highest achievable level would require him to choreograph his own floor routine, something he said he's thinking about.

It would only be the latest in a list of accomplishments any athlete would envy. Looking back on that first day with her son, standing nervously under the rings, Mary recalled that "it was the last time I heard him say 'I can't.'"

That fear has long since been replaced by another personal motto, which the newly minted Hall-of-Famer recited after his return from Raleigh: "I can," Carlton said, smiling broadly, "I can."

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