



Blue and Gold Tournament: Brackets, players to watch

SPORTS, 1B

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HAPPY KWANZAA

'I DIDN'T GIVE UP'



Hanna Smulczenski with Bear POWER program leaders including Caleb Hatz, Kim Roam and April Phillips. PROVIDED BY MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

MSU program for students with special needs celebrates first graduate

Claudette Riley
Springfield News-Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

In the Plaster Student Union one day before graduating from Missouri State, Hanna Smulczenski listed many of the friends, family, teachers and others who supported her goal of earning a high school diploma and — the morning of Dec. 15 — a bachelor's degree.

She had an inkling what she was capable of, and so did they.

"It was my family — my parents, my sister, my aunts, uncles, both grandparents," said Hanna, 28. "I also had sup-

port through my education career, starting in kindergarten."

Not everyone had Hanna's back. Her mom, Kelly Smulczenski, recalled a difficult comment she heard years ago from a classroom teacher.

"The teacher told me 'Hanna doesn't need to know how to spell, she is not going to make it too far in life,'" she said.

Hanna said she grew up knowing certain goals might be harder to accomplish. But, she did not use that as an excuse not to try.

"I didn't give up on my education," she said.

Hanna was born 23 weeks prema-

ture, arriving March 4 instead of the expected July 4, and spent months recovering in a neonatal intensive care unit.

She was diagnosed with autism, asthma and a mild form of cerebral palsy. Her vision impairment, which includes no peripheral vision, has grown worse.

"I literally have tunnel vision," Hanna said, adding she may soon need a service dog. "Have you ever looked through a kaleidoscope? It is like that. You just see the pretty colors and everything else is black."

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Crystal Quade, the Missouri House Minority Leader and Democratic representative for District 132.

NATHAN PAPES/SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER

Quade wants to abolish grocery taxes

Kelly Dereuck
Springfield News-Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Looking towards the 2024 legislative session, Missouri House Minority Floor Leader Crystal Quade, D-Springfield, has a few big goals in mind, including abolishing the sales tax on groceries and restoring abortion rights in the state.

Quade, who is running for Missouri Governor in 2024, plans to file legislation aimed at accomplishing these objectives in the Missouri General Assembly. She has been endorsed in her gubernatorial campaign by Planned Parenthood, in an election year with debates sure to center around abortion.

Although varying ballot initiatives also aim to enshrine abortion rights in the constitution, Quade's House Joint Resolution would, if passed, allow voters to decide the issue while bypassing the costly time-consuming process of signature collection facing the citizen-led ballot initiatives.

"I'm filing this House Joint Resolution so voters can finally have their say without the gimmicks and outright lies we've seen play out in the courts," Quade said in an emailed statement. "While politicians have played with people's freedoms, Missourians have suffered."

Quade's bill would face serious headwinds in a legislature dominated by Republicans, who are sure to be reluctant to budge on their anti-abortion beliefs. Republican State Sen. Mike

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Elvis-loving SPS elementary student part of event in Memphis

Claudette Riley
Springfield News-Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Arriving at home Friday for the start of the winter break, Springfield fourth-grader Jett Watts turned on his favorite Elvis Presley movie, "Blue Hawaii."

"I've seen it millions of times," Jett said, exaggerating slightly.

The Sequiota Elementary student explained, while wearing a necklace and shirt emblazoned with Elvis' lightning bolt "Taking Care of Business" logo, that the 1961 musical showcased both Elvis' incredible singing voice and his spot-on comedic timing.

"He is just really funny in this

one," he said.

Jett, who turned 10 on Saturday, is a super fan of the American singer and actor. He can't remember a time when he wasn't listening to Elvis music, watching Elvis movies, or wearing Elvis-inspired clothes.

The Elvis fandom may be embedded in his DNA.

His grandfather, Springfield-based entertainer Louie Michael, met his wife while traveling and performing as an Elvis tribute artist. Their oldest daughter Ashley Watts — Jett's mom — sings and loves of vintage clothing, makeup and accessories.

Louie Michael loved to cradle Jett, his first grandchild, as a baby and sing Elvis'

"Can't Help Falling In Love." Ashley also likely contributed by playing Elvis movies and music. "It happened organically."

The entire family traveled to Memphis, Tennessee in August 2022 for Elvis Week. Centered at Graceland, the packed event welcomed fans from across the globe to mark the 45th anniversary of Elvis' passing.

There were tours, shows highlighting musicians who played with Elvis, performances by tribute artists, gospel music and a candlelight vigil.

Jett said he loved the yellow and black "TV room" at Graceland and being

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Jett Watts, a fourth grader at Sequiota Elementary, and his mother Ashley Watts are both fans of Elvis Presley.

PROVIDED BY ASHLEY WATTS

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Quade

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Moon has even sponsored legislation that would levy criminal charges against a woman who receives an abortion in the state.

Other efforts to restore abortion rights and protect access to contraceptives have also faced resistance through numerous lawsuits delaying the signature collection process. Ballot language written by Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft and fiscal notes from Auditor Scott Fitzpatrick have been challenged by both organizations seeking to put differing abortion rights petitions on the 2024 ballot.

"The timeline is definitely a crunch, and I am not going to say that it's not," Quade said. "That's by design. Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, that was his in-

tent, was to run out the clock and try every way that he could to continue to lose it in court."

Missouri was the first state to enact a near-total ban on abortion following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade last year.

As for her plan to abolish grocery taxes, Quade's legislation would establish a gradual end to the state sales tax on grocery items through a two-phase plan.

First, it would reduce the state tax rate on groceries from 1.225% to 0.5% then down to zero. Then, it would target municipal taxes on food, which can be as high as 8% in some parts of the state.

"Eliminating the grocery tax is the first step towards prioritizing making life more affordable for every Missourian," Quade said. "From single moms to working class families, everyone will benefit from this change."

Missourians would save about \$1.6 billion, according to Quade, though that means that state and local coffers would be short that same amount in tax reve-

nue. However, Quade's legislation addresses the lost revenue for municipalities by creating a fund for them to recover the lost taxes.

"I definitely understand the concern that local governments may have with this conversation, but I believe that taxing groceries is ultimately more burdensome to low-income Missourians," Quade said. "There are ways we can work with local governments to help shore up that lost revenue while they work to find alternative solutions."

As for the lost state revenue, Quade has solutions for recouping the losses, such as taxing yachts, which are currently not taxed in Missouri, and adding a 1% tax on foreign-owned farmland.

"This bill is just the starting point of all of the many tax places that we can look to," Quade said. "I'm hopeful that this conversation will continue to bring more ideas to the table."

Graduate

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Hanna's schooling started in the St. Louis area but her father, who is part of the Cardinals organization, took a job in Springfield.

She graduated from Kickapoo High School in 2014. Three years later, she earned an associate's degree from Ozarks Technical Community College.

Hanna was interested in obtaining more education but didn't have a specific direction and was unsure what options were available.

"So I took a year and a half break," she said.

Then her mother, an administrative assistant at Missouri State, learned about a new program at the university called Bear POWER. It provides an entire system of support for students with intellectual or development disabilities who want to pursue higher education.

Students who enroll have the option of living independently on campus. They take courses, for credit or not, learn job-readiness skills and complete internships.

They have the guidance of program staff and Bear POWER Ambassadors, a team of trained student volunteers, who help the participants navigate campus life.

"They're going and getting their degree but are involved in the program and also giving back to kids like Hanna and giving the support," said Kelly Smulczenski, Hanna's mom. "She has had some wonderful ambassadors."

Hanna joined the program for the spring 2020 semester but only lived on campus for 2-1/2 months because of the global pandemic.

"One of my goals is to eventually live independently," she said. "But at the same time I know I'm going to need help from services."

She stayed the course, taking one class after another — all for college credit.

"I will admit there are some times I did have a few meltdowns, especially between doing the Bear POWER program and regular classes," Hanna said. "It got overwhelming."

She said "pep talks" with the program staff and ambassadors kept her on track. "They were great when I just needed an ear to listen."

Asked about participating in campus events and activities, Hanna said that was limited but mostly because she was so focused on her studies.

"I had to sacrifice one thing to achieve another," she said.

The program is typically five semesters, including one summer session, and participants can earn a non-degree certificate.

Since its inception in 2019, 14 students have completed the Bear POWER program and earned certificates including this

year's graduates: Madison Stamps, Jacob Lackey, and Paul Broske II.

Hanna earned that certificate but didn't stop there. She is the first Bear POWER graduate to also earn a bachelor's degree in general studies, with an emphasis in history and religion.

April Phillips, director of Bear POWER, said each student enters the program with different goals and the plans is to support them.

She said staff then come alongside the stu-

dent to "keep them moving forward and helping them."

Phillips turned to Hanna, in the interview, and said: "You are showing the proof that hard work and that desire to do more can make things happen."

Caleb Hatz, program coordinator for Bear POWER, said pride about what Hanna achieved gets him "teary-eyed."

"She is really breaking down barriers and breaking down stereotypes. She is a goal-setter and she goes out and gets what she

wants and that determination is amazing to see in our students," Hatz said.

Hatz said programs like Bear POWER are needed because they help students with special needs who may not be able to access higher education through traditional routes.

"It is shining a light that just because you have a different ability level, it does not stop you from achieving your goals," he said.

Through the program, Hanna completed an internship with the Wonders

Of Wildlife National Museum & Aquarium. She wants to find a job that marries her love of history and working with animals.

"I know this will help me further with whatever career I want to do," she said.

Kelly Smulczenski said some of Hanna's friends with special needs attempted to go to college but gave up because they did not have the supports available through the Bear POWER program.

"Had they had the right resources, they could succeed. Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean you should treat them any different," she said. "You have to figure out their strengths and weaknesses and how they can contribute not only to society but to their community."

Claudette Riley covers education for the News-Leader. Email tips and story ideas to crliley@news-leader.com.

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