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Disability does not deter student's road to success

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At the age of 6, Kushal Parikh was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy.

Not knowing how much the degenerative disease would take its course, the Darien resident said it was hard to adjust at first. But he and his brother — who is 3 years older and diagnosed with the disease at the same time — endured together.

Parikh was put in a wheelchair when he was 11, and though his muscles had gradually become weaker, his heart and determination only grew stronger. Eight years later, his hard work paid off. Parikh attends the University of Illinois after being honored by a Cerebral Palsy organization.

"Sometimes it was hard getting people to understand I'm not really that different," Parikh said. "Obviously I have a wheelchair, but I should still be treated the same. People shouldn't feel bad for me."

In the summertime, there is nothing Parikh looks forward to more than his

Muscular Dystrophy Association camp in Bloomington, which he first started going to with his brother when he was 7. Each camper is paired up with a high school student, who helps them throughout the week. From playing in the pool to bonding around a camp fire, the camp has become a second home for Parikh.

"It's helped me realize that I'm not really that different," he said. "I might have some problems, but I can still accomplish things!"

And accomplish things he has. As a student at Hinsdale South High School, Parikh was part of the National Honor Society and often did fundraisers for muscular dystrophy. This summer, before the big transition to college, Parikh was awarded the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Chicago 2007 Women's Board Scholar award.

With recommendations from family and friends and a heartfelt personal letter to the board, Parikh stood out among applicants for the award.

"Kushal's letter was one of those things you read and you'll never forget because it's

so powerful," said Laura Durudogan, chairman of the UCP Women's Board. "He's truly deserving of this award, and he's doing so well. It makes us so proud."

Board members drove out to Parikh's house and presented him with a laptop computer with word-prediction software to help reduce typing fatigue before he went off to the University of Illinois.

Parikh said the technology has been helpful with the class projects and he looks forward to using it for a paper.

The transition to college is never easy, but Parikh said he made the right decision in choosing Illinois. A friend had recommended the school when they were at camp together, telling him all about his experience and how it allowed him to live independently.

With students and staff there to assist when needed, Parikh is loving college life.

"It's worked out really well because U of I is the best school for people with disabilities," he said. "I don't think at any other school I could be this independent."