

Hop, now step. With all his concentration. Hop, now step. *Even*, he says to himself – *keep your legs even*. One, now two. One, now two.

Twisting and hobbling, his feet unevenly hit the floor. But he doesn't mind. He's used to it.

"The way I walk used to really upset me," freshman Gerald Richardson said. "But it doesn't matter anymore. I know I can't change who I am, and I never could. I had no choice in how I turned out, but I have a choice in how I deal with it."

"I've been called a lot of things. 'Cripple, idiot, retard.' Once in elementary, some kids threw rocks at me...I'm never angry with people who tease me. I could be wrong, but I believe people should be nice to each other."

Richardson was born premature, weighing only two pounds. Seconds after birth, his condition worsened. Trauma in his lungs led to a stroke in his brain – doctors thought he wouldn't survive.

But Richardson made it. He was physically damaged for life – brain tissue was impaired, and he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a disorder marked by muscle impairment that affects his control of movement.

"I never knew I was different until I started school," Richardson said. "I realized I didn't move the way the other kids did. I tried to imitate them, but I just couldn't do it. I'm okay with it now, but back then I couldn't understand what was wrong."

Living his entire life with cerebral palsy has given Richardson a unique perspective on life.

"I've been called a lot of things. 'Cripple, idiot, retard.' Once in elementary, some kids threw rocks at me, and another time they pushed me off the slide," Richardson said. "I'm never angry with the people who tease me. I could be wrong, but I believe people should be nice to each other."

Maybe if I'm nice they'll realize I'm just a normal person, too."

Sometimes comments from others still get to the freshman.

"I can tell when people are being overly nice to me," Richardson said. "Their voice gets high-pitched and they say things like I was a toddler. It makes me feel sick, like I want to throw up. If I need help, I'll ask for it. Otherwise I don't want it. I can handle my life – they don't have to try and make me feel better. At least when people tease me they're telling the truth."

Richardson takes regular and advanced classes, including three pre-AP classes this year. The freshman says he studies an average of five to six hours a night but says he often has to work harder than most of his classmates.

"Sometimes I can't get things right away," Richardson said. "It seems like other people can understand an idea

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or concept quickly when I have to study for a long time. It's frustrating, but feeling bad won't help me. I have to strive to be the best I can be."

Richardson has a history of academic accomplishments. He was inducted into the Junior National Honor Society at Dessau Middle School in his seventh grade year and elected president of the club. Richardson also contributes to as many community service projects as he can, and he hopes to set an example that anyone can accomplish their goals.

"My one wish is that people would be try to be nicer to each other," Richardson said. "I want the world to be better for everyone. Even if people don't think so, I can take care of myself and I can handle everything that happens to me. A lot of people are much more worse off then I am. I would wish them to have an easier life because I think my life is pretty good."

