

Cheerleading and Disability

Callie Smartt was a freshman cheerleader at Andrews High School in Andrews, Texas. But she was not the same as the other cheerleaders: she was confined to a motorized wheelchair because she had cerebral palsy.

Originally, Callie was allowed to join the cheerleading squad and cheered for her freshman year without incident. By all accounts, she did an admirable job. Before her sophomore year began, however, the school urged her mother to sign an agreement that would restrict Callie to the sidelines away from the possibility of injury; cheerleaders have, after all, often been injured by falling players when the play of the game is pursued out of bounds. Some of the cheerleaders and their parents backed the agreement saying that Callie puts both herself and other cheerleaders at risk, and that her teammates were burdened and distracted by having to attend to Callie's personal needs resulting from her disability. Callie's mother fought for the inclusion of Callie in all cheerleading activities.¹ Eventually, though, Callie opted to stop fighting to join the cheerleading squad, and instead joined a newly formed pep-squad that would cheer from the stands, with no performance component.

Some have argued that Callie should not have had to make such a decision; she should have been allowed to be on the cheerleading squad and allowed as well to participate in whichever activities she could, even at some risk to herself. Supporters of the school's decision argue that the school has a responsibility to protect the safety of Callie and others, and they contend that the increased risks associated with having Callie and her wheelchair on the field justify requiring her to stay on the sidelines.²

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) What is the purpose of cheerleading? How might consideration of this purpose affect the debate about Callie's eligibility for the squad?
- (2) Do safety concerns outweigh Callie's wishes to join the squad and participate according to her abilities?
- (3) What responsibilities does a school have to protect its students from risks posed by other students when they engage in school sanctioned activities?
- (4) Should it be considered discrimination if people with disabilities are not allowed to participate in the same activities as other students? Why or why not?

¹ http://www.oaqa.com/article_29ca5cda-e937-501c-92b5-e7f39c3c6de3.html?mode=jam

² <http://lubbockonline.com/news/042397/andrews.htm>