

REFLECTIONS

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The fall and rise of Jaeleen Davis





Rose Butterfly

Disease wrecked her
childhood and tragedy
nearly ended her
life as an adult, but
for **Jaeleen Davis**,
adversity is a cue to
spread her wings

by *Justin Engel*

Jaeleen Davis at first didn't notice how her blood seemed to spill into the shape of a butterfly on the spot where she fell from the sky.

Her mother snapped photos of the curious scene days after Davis dropped nearly 30 feet onto the concrete floor of an empty outdoor amphitheater on Detroit's riverfront. Overwhelmed with agony from a fractured vertebrae and the bone protruding from her wrist, the 21-year-old wasn't aware of the pattern forming in red beneath her broken body in the moments after the fall. Photos provided her with that visual much later.

Other details did not elude Davis on Saturday, July 16, 2016. She recalled plenty in her account of the day: The Hollywood Vampires concert she attended at DTE Energy Music Theater earlier that evening; the friends after the show inviting her to join them for a riverside stroll in Detroit; the way the Canadian lights sparkled against the water; how the night's setting grew increasingly dim as the group drifted further from the cityscape's glow; the grass crunching softly beneath her feet while she walked; the sudden, shocking absence of any surface at all beneath her feet; and the fall. That deep, frightening fall.

"I don't remember the impact, but I do remember laying there, seeing a light and thinking, 'This is the light people talk about when they recall near-death experiences,'" Davis said. "I was thinking, 'OK, I'm gone.'"

The source of that light, she eventually realized, was a distant bulb in the dark. Still, Davis wasn't certain she was alive until a responding ambulance further illuminated the surroundings.

Medics spent minutes stabilizing her. Surgeons spent hours resetting split bones. Davis spent weeks in hospital rooms and rehabilitation clinics before medical experts cleared her to walk again.

"The doctor said that fall should have killed me, or if I had fallen slightly different, that I would have been paralyzed," Davis said.

The doctor also said that Davis should consider pausing all her previous plans — and there were plenty — in favor of months of rest and recovery.

The SVSU communication and criminal justice double major was due to study abroad in Sydney, Australia from February to July 2017, and she had been on schedule to graduate that same December. She was an active advocate for a nonprofit organization benefiting sick and ailing children, with a big fundraiser set for

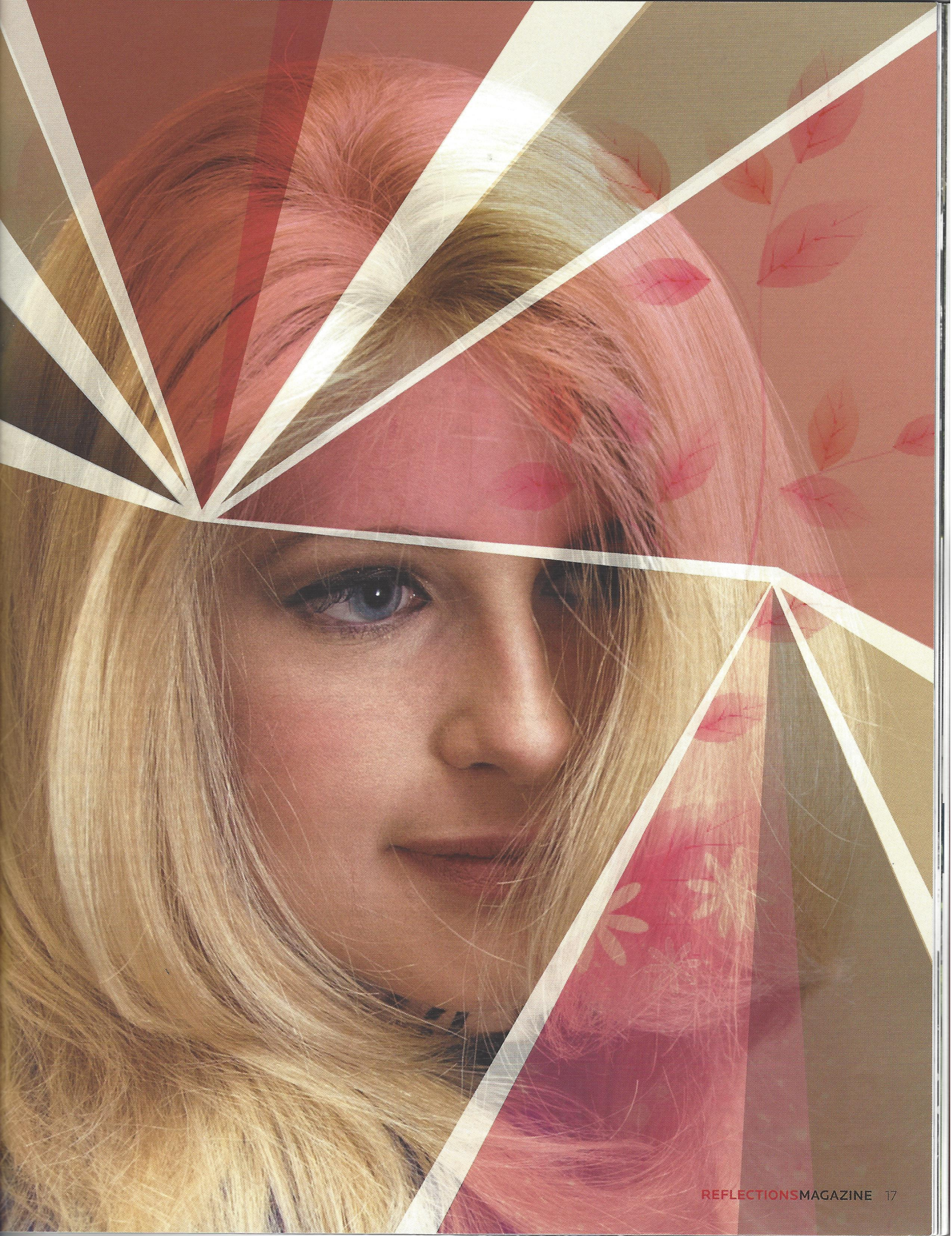




photo by Michael Randolph

JAELEEN DAVIS SPENT FOUR WEEKS REHABILITATING AT HEARTLAND HEALTH CARE CENTER IN BRIDGEPORT TOWNSHIP, WHERE SHE RECOVERED FROM INJURIES SUSTAINED FROM FALLING NEARLY 30 FEET ONTO CONCRETE IN JULY 2016. HER BOYFRIEND, BRODERICK FLYNN, A BIOLOGY MAJOR AT SVSU, REGULARLY VISITED.

September 2016. She placed in the top 10 during her fourth consecutive appearance at the Miss Michigan pageant five weeks before her fall, and a fifth campaign for the crown was in the planning stages. And her ambitions as an actress landed Davis a small role on an NBC primetime TV show in January 2016. She was hoping to capitalize on the exposure with more acting gigs.

Davis feared following her doctor's advice of pausing those plans for months meant considerably delaying or outright derailing the freight train-like propulsion she spent a lifetime gathering en route to accomplishing her goals. Davis' response to the prescription: "No, thank you," she said. "If I have to show up in a wheelchair and a neck brace, I'll do it. This isn't going to stop me at all."

Family and friends weren't surprised by her persevering flair. Some suggested her injuries would accelerate her life's momentum. For those people, such a prediction was not empty encouragement of a youthful naiveté they secretly doubted; such a prediction

was backed by years of evidence.

The strength of Davis' conviction, after all, was defined by the way she turned a childhood disease that robbed her of her hair — and, for a time, her spirit — into a source of empowerment and inspiration.

The first fall of Jaeleen Davis — the one that left her largely bald for life — managed to significantly interrupt the thrust of her earliest aspirations.

Born the only child of Lisa and David Davis on March 3, 1995 in Saginaw, she showed a passion for performance arts as early as the age of 3. That was the year of one of her first memories and favorite possessions: A Fisher-Price toy stage — barely taller than her — that she used as a backdrop prop for at-home renditions of songs such as Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" and the Christian hymn, "Jesus Loves Me."

"I always made sure mom and dad were there, and my stuffed animals too," Davis said. "I would open the curtain to this little stage, sing, and then go back behind the curtain when I was

done. That was the first step."

The second: Davis' mother drove her to Saginaw's Pit & Balcony Theatre to audition for an upcoming production of "Babes in Toyland," directed by Ric Roberts, now an SVSU professor of theatre. The 5-year-old earned a small role singing in the chorus.

"It was such a blast," she said. "That's what initially hooked me on becoming a performer."

Davis continued to audition and nab roles in theatre productions across Saginaw, Bay City and Midland until her parents felt she was ready for a new outlet. While browsing a magazine, her mother discovered a casting call for a child role in a 2002 Broadway production of "Oliver!" She didn't hesitate to sign up her daughter for auditions. The 7-year-old spent weeks preparing. Roberts, impressed with the young protégé's ambition for the arts, coached her for the opportunity.

"She sought out criticism of her work in ways that were well beyond her years," Roberts said. "She constantly was working on improving her work on

every level."

When Davis arrived in New York, she was more than ready for the spotlight.

"I remember they wanted me to sing a few verses from 'Consider Yourself,'" Davis said of the bouncy ditty from the first act of "Oliver!"

"I started to sing the whole song."

She won a role as a chorus boy. Rehearsals were scheduled to begin in a few months. Davis returned to Michigan to prepare for the temporary move to the Big Apple with her mother.

"While I was waiting to go back to New York, I started to lose my hair," she said. "It's like I saw this dream starting to come to life, and then I felt it slipping away."

The slip started on what began as an idyllic Christmas Day in 2002. Davis awoke to her parents gifting her a black Chihuahua puppy. She played merrily with the newest addition to the Saginaw Township household. She spent the morning with her family, basking in the warm holiday glow of the moment and the prospects of her theatrical future.

Her expanding world collapsed later in the aftermath of a bath as her mother brushed Davis' hair. It was their daily routine, but on that day, something was different.

"The first thing I noticed was the hair pooling against the drain," Davis said. "Then I remember turning around, and there was more hair on the brush than on my head."

A few strokes of the comb dislodged large clumps of hair, and before daughter or mother realized it, Davis was nearly bald. What remained on her scalp fell out on its own before her 8th birthday. By then, doctors identified the culprit of her condition: alopecia universalis, a rare and severe form of a disease that convinced her immune system to attack and extract every strand of hair on her body.

The diagnosis was no death sentence. Medical experts told her she would suffer no physical consequences except for a lifetime without hair, although small patches grew back during puberty.

Her spirit sustained a deep damage, though. The wound festered for years.

Depression set in immediately. Upset by her changing appearance, the once-cheery extrovert grew introverted and withdrawn, leading her family to cancel her Broadway role.



photo by Michael Randolph

DAVIS RIDES A CAROUSEL DURING THE BRIDGE FEST CELEBRATION IN BRIDGEPORT TOWNSHIP IN JUNE 2016. DAVIS, WHO WAS CROWNED MISS BRIDGE FEST, WAS SEVERELY INJURED DURING A NEARLY 30-FOOT FALL DAYS LATER.

"I don't think I cared at that point about the play," Davis said. "Even though I would have been healthy enough, my mental health was not well."

Social rejection became an issue early on. Davis, at the time of her diagnosis, was a third grade student at Saginaw's Handley Elementary School, where she once enjoyed learning and socializing. Before the end of the school year, she was completely bald, hiding her exposed scalp beneath bandanas and cheap wigs. Friends turned on her.

"They called me all sorts of names," she said.

Davis transferred between multiple schools, stopped auditioning for theatre roles and quit Girl Scouts, isolating herself from her peers during those formative years. She spent much of her time after school at home. Her parents later divorced, splitting that home in two.

"I didn't feel like I deserved to be here anymore," she said. "I didn't want to be me. I wasn't OK. There were a lot of wasted years in there."

Then she found inspiration.

"When I met her, she was not a happy kid," Maggie Varney, founder and CEO of Wigs 4 Kids, recalled of the first time Davis walked into the nonprofit's office in 2006. "She wouldn't even make eye

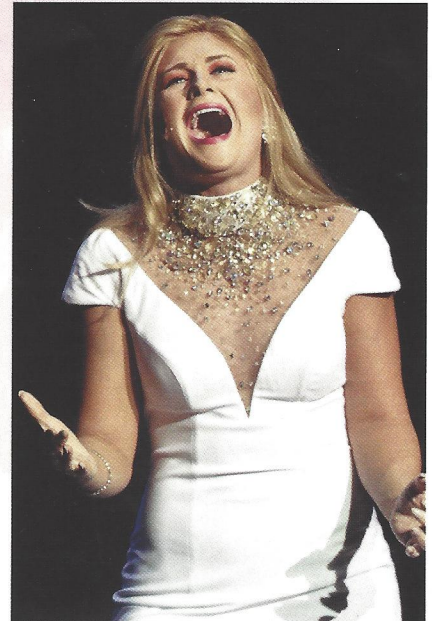


photo courtesy Joel Bissell, MLive

DAVIS, WHO FINISHED IN THE TOP 10 DURING THE JUNE 2016 MISS MICHIGAN COMPETITION, SANG "A NEW LIFE" FROM THE PLAY, "JEKYLL AND HYDE."

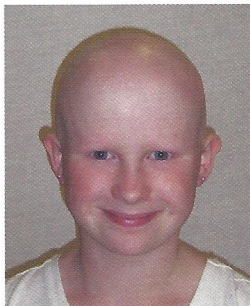


photo courtesy Wigs 4 Kids

JAELEEN DAVIS FIRST VISITED WIGS 4 KIDS IN 2006, THREE YEARS AFTER ALOPECIA CAUSED HER HAIR TO FALL OFF. THE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION PROVIDED THE THEN-11-YEAR-OLD WITH THE FIRST OF MANY HAIRPIECES.

contact with me.”

Davis, then 11, was skeptical of the St. Clair Shores-based organization, which provided pricey wigs for free to children suffering from medical conditions that caused hair loss.

Her attitude upon arriving at Wigs 4 Kids wasn't unusual, Varney said. Few organizations specializing in wig production were prepared for young clientele, let alone children ailing psychologically. As a result, fitting a head for a hairpiece — a process wig producers often asked clients to perform using self-help kits — sometimes proved humiliating for children. Davis experienced such embarrassment during earlier attempts to find a suitable hairpiece.

Wigs4Kids, on the other hand, attempted to create a comforting experience by also providing educational and professional guidance, a facility featuring a home-like atmosphere, children's events and a network for families sharing similar circumstances.

“It's not just about hair,” Varney said. “It's all about social acceptance. That's what we try to create for our kids. They don't really know this is therapy. They're just busy having a great time, being a kid, being creative and relating to others.”

Wigs 4 Kids helped heal Davis psychologically, but it wasn't an immediate fix. A rare smile appeared the first time she fastened a hairpiece to her head there. She later attended one of the nonprofit's social gatherings. Then another, and another. She eventually made regular eye contact with Varney. Hello and goodbye hugs became routine for the pair.

Varney gradually chipped away at the walls Davis built around herself following her hair loss. A public breakthrough — away from the Wigs 4 Kids center — came years later when the 13-year-old decided to enter the Bay City Mall-hosted 2009 Sunburst Beauty Pageant.

“I just wanted to see how I would do,” said Davis, who hid from judges the fact her hair was a wig.

She won the contest. Davis, though, was most satisfied with the victory claimed in one of the competition's sub-categories: Best hair.

“That was a defining moment for me,” she said. “That was my real hair to them. I realized, a hairpiece can fix a child who is aching to feel normal again. I felt normal — I am normal — because of a hairpiece.”

After that, she began competing in more

pageants, no longer withholding that she wore a hairpiece. Instead, she embraced her Wigs 4 Kids experience as part of her platform campaign. That tradition continued during her Miss Michigan appearances.

She championed the nonprofit in other ways, too. Davis became a mentor to the children who were aided by Wigs 4 Kids. She supported fundraisers that paid for the expensive hairpieces. She attended Lansing press conferences outside the State Capitol to urge lawmakers to pass a Wigs 4 Kids-endorsed bill requiring private insurance companies to cover costs for hairpieces of Michigan children in need.

Her rediscovered confidence influenced success in other aspects of life, renewing her passion for education as well as the arts.

Excelling academically, she enrolled in SVSU's Great Lakes Bay Early College program at 16 while still attending Standish-Sterling High School. Later, she performed research with advisor James Bowers, SVSU assistant professor of criminal justice, on crime in colleges. In September 2015, she presented her paper at the Midwestern Criminal Justice Association Conference, where she was approached by graduate school recruiters.

Davis was unsure if she would take one of them up on their offer after graduation. If she followed that route, her plan would involve pursuing a career as an FBI analyst.

Or she could play one on TV. Davis in recent years returned to acting. Represented by Bravo Talent Agency, she nabbed a role in a Dell computer TV advertisement in 2014. She was also cast in a small part in NBC's primetime police drama, “Chicago PD.”

In the episode titled “Now I'm God,” which aired in January 2016, Davis portrayed a cancer patient defrauded by a doctor. She wore no wig for the role. The barely-there hair on her head was her own. She also played a cancer patient in the Dell ad. Davis said she likely nabbed both roles because of her condition. She embraced the idea that alopecia universalis could play a significant role in her acting career.

“What I thought was a curse was actually a blessing,” she said. “It's opened the door for me to do things I've always wanted to do.”

Maggie Varney cried the Sunday she learned of Davis' near-fatal fall. Then



THE DAY AFTER UNDERGOING SURGERY ON HER INJURED ARM IN SEPTEMBER 2016, DAVIS ATTENDED THE ANNUAL FUNDRAISER FOR WIGS 4 KIDS, WHICH PROVIDES FREE HAIRPIECES – SOMETIMES COSTING UP TO \$5,000 – TO CHILDREN WHO LOST HAIR BECAUSE OF MEDICAL REASONS.

photo by Michael Randolph

Davis' mother, who delivered the news to Varney, quickly conveyed the day's second message: "Jaeleen wants you to know she will have to reschedule her Monday appointment at Wigs 4 Kids."

Tears turned to laughter.

"Jaeleen didn't even know if she would be able to walk again at that point, and here she is, staying on top of her calendar," Varney said.

"Can you understand the tenacity and the chutzpah it takes to do something like that, to be that way. She is a real person and she has her struggles, but she turns getting knocked down into getting back up like no one you've seen."

Varney counted herself among those who believed Davis would make good on her goal of bouncing back strong from

her injuries.

"Knowing Jaeleen, she will find a way to take this and turn it into something that will benefit herself and others," Varney said. "She has a very different way of looking at things than most people."

That way of looking at things extended to her view of the bloodied imprint she left behind on a cold concrete floor in Detroit. Others might have seen such a scene and recognized it as some random-shaped splotch of rose-red gore. In the Rorschach test of her life, though, Jaeleen Davis saw something quite different down there. She saw a butterfly, its wings spread, symbolic for her of the strength needed to lift her up from where she had fallen.

It wouldn't be the first time she achieved such flight. ■