

New Mexico Activities Association Student-Athlete Spotlight



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DeGroat Sets High Expectations

By Karl Schneider

There just isn't enough time in the day for Rylee DeGroat.

But even if there were a few more hours to work with, it still wouldn't be enough for the Thoreau High senior. There couldn't be enough time because she's always looking for new, and more ways to challenge herself.

DeGroat, 16 and a straight-A student, will graduate from Thoreau in the spring. She runs cross-country, plays point guard for the basketball team, and runs the 200, 400, 4x200, 4x400 and medley relays, and pole vaults and long jumps for the Lady Hawks track team. And when she graduates in the spring, shortly after her 17th birthday, she'll receive an associate degree from New Mexico State University.

"As a coach you always preach student-athlete, and with her, student comes first," Thoreau cross-country coach Brandon Leslie said of DeGroat. "She knows what her obligations are, and that's getting her (school) work done. We have a very young team, and I think her being that way, the other runners see that and use her as an example. I think that is a great thing for our program."

DeGroat started taking online classes through NMSU her freshman year of high school when she was enrolled at Crownpoint High School. At Crownpoint, she took chemistry and physics labs, which she said sparked her pursuit toward a degree in the sciences. This semester she's taking four online classes, 12 credit hours, to help achieve that degree.

"These college courses created a new challenge for me," DeGroat said. "They really broadened my perspective on how much education can give me. I like to push myself in education and challenge myself. It was just the challenge I was looking for."

The class load DeGroat has taken on will set her up for success when she leaves home for college next fall. It has shown her what to expect when she gets to whichever college she chooses. But the work she's doing isn't just to benefit her future, she's looking for ways to help everyone.

During the summer, DeGroat finished her clinical rounds while working at a retirement home in Grants. In December, she'll take the Certified Nursing Assistant exam so she can help give people the treatment they need.



Now, on top of her time practicing with the cross-country team and taking college credits, DeGroat is working on her senior research project where she's examining how a potential cure for Alzheimer's disease would affect millions of people.

College courses, working at the retirement home, studying for the CNA exam—each challenge is a stepping stone toward her ultimate goal of becoming a neurosurgeon.

"That's what I've always wanted to do, and that relates back to the Alzheimer's research that I'm doing. It's what I've wanted to do since I was in elementary school," DeGroat said. "I've taken it upon myself to try to get everything that I can do and this will benefit me in my future."

DeGroat's work doesn't consist of just academics and athletics. She's an active member of her church and community, helping with different drives and projects to help the less fortunate. She's also a part of Thoreau High's drama club and will be the lead role in the school's upcoming production. The play isn't a spiced up version of a classic, it's something that hits on a sensitive issue in the community, suicide. The role DeGroat plays is a teenage girl, who left 13 tapes, each one detailing an individual who played a role in her suicide.

"We're really trying to convey a message about anti-bullying and how even the littlest things you say can affect people," DeGroat said. "Suicide here has been a really big topic. Since we've had a few deaths here a while back we really want to address that problem within the community because people are afraid to talk about it, and they shouldn't be because it's a serious problem."

All the work DeGroat is putting in, competing in athletics, high school classes, college classes, helping in her church and community, and helping shed light on sensitive subjects through drama aren't solely for her benefit. Yes, all of these things will help her, but what she's doing could have a far-reaching influence on everyone around her, both directly and indirectly.

"She's a great ambassador in that area," Leslie said of DeGroat being an example for others. "I think when she graduates from here it will give all these other kids hope and show them what they're capable of doing. They can have that attitude of, 'If Rylee can do it, I can do it.' That's where she's a positive role model for us."