

Truancy officer embraces individuality, tattoos and all

By TYLER ELLYSON
Columbus Telegram

SCHUYLER — Sidnee Pavel got her first tattoo when she was 16.

The large angel wings on her back — one black and another white — represent both a dark past and promising future.

The tattoo, along with numerous others scattered across her body, reminds her of the obstacles she has overcome to get where she is today and the people who have helped her along the way.

Today she's helping students in Colfax County schools overcome obstacles on their way to graduation.

Pavel, a 2012 graduate of David City High School, knows what it's like to be bullied. She and her younger brother Jordan experienced it during school, she said.

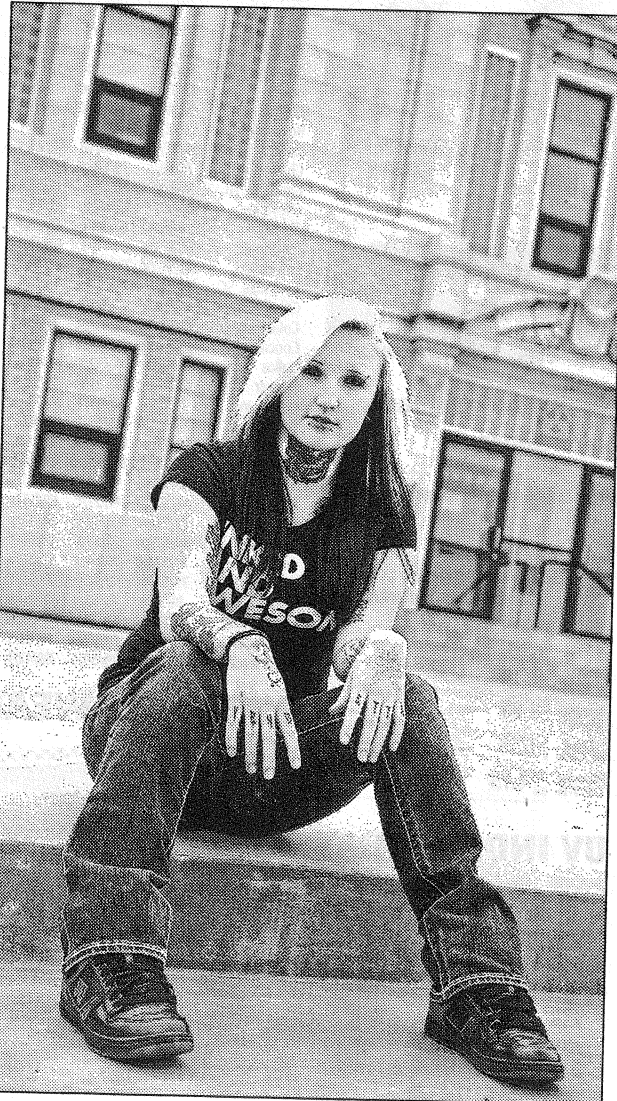
In high school, Pavel hung out with a small group of friends and spent her free time reading about demonology and psychology, studying current events and politics and working three jobs. She had an interest in the Holocaust and has been a strong advocate for animal rights and a successful horse trainer for years.

"I was kind of a weird student. I was always reading all the time," said Pavel, whose love of the arts is represented by a tattoo of Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" on her left arm.

She also was different from the other students, in both appearance and mindset.

Pavel embraces individuality while rejecting most social norms.

"I don't like to conform to what society believes is acceptable," said Pavel, who learned to speak her mind at a young age and used her passions to excel in speech during high school.



TYLER ELLYSON/Columbus Telegram

Sidnee Pavel is using her life experiences to make an impact on students through her job as a truancy officer in Colfax County.

'If I can make that impact in another kid's life, that would be worth more than anything in the world to me.'

— Truancy officer
Sidnee Pavel

Although she would become a homecoming candidate and member of the prom royalty court, her brother continued to struggle throughout high school.

He hated his life and school, she said, and was in danger of not graduating until his older sister intervened.

"I think I had a very big impact on him going through school," Pavel said of her brother, whom she considers to be her best friend.

The 19-year-old with a pierced lip and eyebrow calls herself an advocate for people who are different. She knows firsthand that a person's appearance and background don't affect their abilities.

Looks, after all, can be deceiving.

"I've always been the type of person where I will stand up for you no matter what," said Pavel.



Pavel took a different path than most after graduation.

Instead of heading off to college, she completed a one-year apprenticeship at a Hastings tattoo parlor then, against her parents' advice, moved to Myrtle Beach, S.C., to live with a guy she met.

She fit right in at the Harley-Davidson dealership where she worked for eight months, but the relationship with her boyfriend soon fizzled.

Living on her own and working two jobs, seven days a week, she decided it was time to return home to be closer to family and friends.

After moving in with her father in Rising City — the man honored by a "Superman" tattoo on her right arm — Pavel received a job offer many would consider ill-fitting for someone with the word "vendetta" scrolled across her knuckles.

The Colfax County Attorney's Office, which started a state-funded truancy program earlier this year, needed a pair of officers to work with struggling students.

Pavel, who was recently hired as a truancy officer, is now using her experiences to make sure students at Schuyler Community and other Colfax County schools don't take the wrong path in life.

"I look at each individual kid as a similar case to my brother — and I know that my brother is an extremely talented individual, but he just needed the help to get through school," she said.

"If I can make that impact in another kid's life, that would be worth more than anything in the world to me."



Colfax County Attorney Denise Kracl was part of the committee of community and school officials that hired Pavel.

While she knows some might second-guess the decision, the 40-year-old county attorney believes her new employee will make a difference.

"I'm sure that she's gotten a few looks, but she's doing a really good job," said Kracl.

The county attorney's office has received more than 130 referrals from the Schuyler school district alone in the past few weeks, according to Kracl, and more names are handed over each day.

"Everything else we're doing clearly isn't working," Kracl said.

These students, ranging from the elementary schools to the high school, are children referred to the court system because they've missed too many unexcused days of class and may not

advance to the next grade level.

The goal of the state truancy law is to identify the problems that cause students to miss class and develop a plan to solve the issues before it's too late.

Kracl said Pavel is someone the students can relate to, someone who understands them and may be more likely to gain cooperation.

"She lights up a room when she walks in," said Kracl.

Schuyler Central High School Principal Greg Pavlik sees the same positives.

He believes Pavel's life experiences and role as a big sister will be beneficial in her new job.

Pavlik said she's already stressing the importance of education and encouraging students to get their diplomas.

"I think she's a smart girl," he said.



Pavel says she's thankful Kracl was willing to take a chance on her, and she's already planning on turning the job opportunity into a career.

"This is what I want to do," she said.

Because she's not a typical "authority figure," Pavel believes she can connect with students on a more personal level.

"With me they can't use the excuse, 'Well, you don't know what it's like,'" she said.

Pavel knows exactly what it's like, growing up in a struggling family, striving to do her best and pushing her brother to graduate simply to make her parents proud.

At the very least, her role as a truancy officer shows students everyone has potential — regardless of how others view them.

"I would hope that when they see me they think, 'You know what, there is hope,'" Pavel said.