

Pop Warner Participation

By Matt Bendell

Excellence is a main staple of Pop Warner, both academically and in their sports programs.

Recently, movies that play out the typical stereotypes of cheerleading have been popular. But showing what is really involved with a cheer and dance program is much more than Hollywood shows on the big screen.

For more than 80 years Pop Warner Little Scholars (PWLS) has been providing opportunities for youth all across America to take part in football, cheerleading and dance programs in their local communities. Currently active in 42 states and several foreign countries, more than 400,000 students have been involved with PWLS in decades past with many of the former participants continuing with the programs by volunteering their time and their abilities.

With students from 5 to 16 years old, a central feature of PWLS is excellence, not only in sports, but in academics as well. Students are required to maintain certain academic standards in order to participate in the programs.

The Avalon Wolves Pop Warner cheer and football programs have been active for the past nine years and coach **Shawna Coles** has been leading the cheer squad teams for the past four years. "We focus not only on sports, but on academics as well. The better your academics are, the better you'll do with Pop Warner," Coles says. "We've taken all four of our cheer squads to nationals in the past three years." The Pop Warner National Cheer and Dance Championships have been held at Disney's Wide World of Sports since it opened in 1997.

East Orlando's involvement in the Pop Warner program shows a strong commitment. "We have around 400 participants and about 100 coaches, assistant coaches and junior coaches volunteering with our programs," Coles says. Timber Creek sophomore **Stephanie Finnigan** is one of those extremely involved volunteers.

Involvement with the cheer squad has always been a big part of Stephanie's life. "I started when I was in kindergarten," Stephanie says. Now a junior varsity cheerleader it may seem as though Stephanie has outgrown the Pop Warner cheer squad. But she has chosen to continue her participation by volunteering to assist coaches and younger students with stunts and dance routines. "I'm here to help the girls and the coaches. If they need me to show the students how to do something, I'll demonstrate it," Stephanie says.



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The Avalon Wolves Pop Warner placed at nationals for the past nine years, thanks in part to volunteers like Stephanie Finnigan.

Perhaps the most fulfilling part of her volunteer work is seeing firsthand the progress that the girls are making in their cheer techniques and dancing abilities. Just seeing it all come together isn't the only satisfaction Stephanie gets. She also enjoys seeing how happy the girls are when they go to a competition. "It doesn't matter if we get first or win third, they're just happy that they're able to do it. And that they got the opportunity."

Stephanie's achievements don't only include winning cheer competitions and being a junior varsity cheerleader, she currently juggles a long roster of extra-curricular activities including student government, weightlifting, Beta club, flag football, tumbling classes and gymnastics. And she does it all while maintaining an A/B grade point average.

Who knows what the future holds for Stephanie, but one thing is certain. She knows she would like to continue volunteering with Pop Warner. She says she will continue to volunteer through high school and hopefully college, depending on where she goes to school. "I want to stay involved with [Pop Warner] however I can." **L**

To get involved with Pop Warner visit CentralFlorida-Lifestyle.com.