

“You’re Beautiful”

by Jenny Rose Spaudio

How a local entrepreneur and cancer survivor with Down syndrome is inspiring others to see their own worth

When 17-year-old Raquel Caramello recently found out she won a bronze medallion in the 2021 Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, she couldn't contain her excitement.

"I actually jumped up and down," she says.

Raquel doesn't like to brag about herself – although her achievements certainly warrant it. She's a cancer survivor, an entrepreneur, an advocate for others with Down syndrome, and a former runway model and pioneer for inclusion. Over the years, Raquel has given countless hours and raised thousands and thousands of dollars through her volunteer efforts.

Now, her hard work is being recognized.

In 2020, the National Association of Secondary School Principals partnered with Prudential Financial to select students in grades 5 through 12 across the United States, whose volunteer efforts made an impact during the pandemic. Nominated by her school's principal, Raquel was one of Florida's 10 Distinguished Finalists, and the only one from Central Florida.

The Wekiva Springs resident has raised more than \$10,000 for charities in the past year, alone. Whether it's leading a bowling team for the Down Syndrome Foundation of Florida or diving in the Polar Plunge for Special Olympics, Raquel loves raising money for her favorite causes.

"Raquel also helps out with the BASE Camp Children's



Wekiva Springs resident Raquel Caramello with the bronze medal she earned as one of Florida's 10 Distinguished Finalists in the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards.

Cancer Foundation and at Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children," says Raquel's mother, Janet. "She's donated to the Make-A-Wish Foundation and was actually invited to tell her story to other Make-A-Wish donors as a testimonial."

As if Raquel wasn't busy enough, she's also the CEO of a jewelry business called Raquel Beautiful. Her handmade jewelry comes with cards that say, "You're beautiful" or "You're amazing," and on the back of each card, Raquel writes a personalized message of encouragement.

"A lot of times, she'll say something like, 'You're strong. You can do it,'" Janet explains. "Raquel just really wants to encourage people, especially those who are going through a hard time."

Seeing the Beauty Within

Raquel launched her business four years ago – just a year after she was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 12. At that time, the chemotherapy caused her hair to fall out, and she struggled to feel beautiful.

"Some kids who had bullied her before for having Down syndrome were even more unkind when she lost all her hair," Janet says.

Hideous. Disgusting. Idiot. These are just some of the horrible insults Raquel received from her peers. Raquel doesn't want anyone else to feel like she did, so now she creates and donates her jewelry to sick children, to lift their spirits.

"Raquel wanted people to know that they were beautiful," Janet says. "And just because you don't feel good about yourself on the outside, what's important is what's inside. Everyone is beautiful."

Girls aren't the only ones who need to be reminded of their worth. Raquel also makes sure to create messages for guys that say "You're amazing," "You're strong," or "You're handsome."

You've Got a Friend in Me

Raquel's 885-day journey through chemotherapy wasn't easy, and neither were the countless doctor's appointments during her remission. When asked what helped her get through it, she says, "My friends and my family." Now Raquel wants to be that friend and inspiration for others.

One way she can do that is through her jewelry and messages. Another is simply being the caring go-getter she is. Janet says new moms of kids with Down syndrome often struggle with fears about their children's future, wondering if they will be able to lead a life they love. When those parents see Raquel – a teenage entrepreneur with Down syndrome who overcame cancer – they realize their child's diagnosis doesn't have to limit their future.

Sometimes these moms get the chance to thank Raquel in person. Janet recalls one of those moments at a Runway to Hope Fashion Show – Raquel spent two years with the organization as a model. At one point, a woman Janet had never seen before approached her.

"Are you Raquel's mom?" the woman asked Janet. "I just want you to know we got a piece of her jewelry when my family first got to Arnold Palmer. It meant so much to us."



Moments like those reveal the power behind Raquel's acts of service. It's the power of simply saying, "You're beautiful."

After she was diagnosed with cancer at age 12, Raquel began making jewelry, which she donates to children facing their own health crisis. Each piece of jewelry comes with a card carrying an encouraging message like "You're beautiful" or "You're amazing."

"She just really wants to encourage people, especially those who are going through a hard time."

– Janet, Raquel's mother

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