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The University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

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GOVERNOR'S DAUGHTER OVERCOMES DISABILITY, FOLLOWS FATHER'S PATH TO UM LAW SCHOOL

By Becky Shay
University Communications

There was a time when Annie Racicot stuttered so bad she had to sing to get her words out. Now, she's in her first year at The University of Montana—Missoula School of Law and planning to use her voice and wits to help people.

Born with cerebral palsy, Racicot has spent her life facing and overcoming challenges. Entering law school is no exception.

"Everyone in law school is intelligent, but with different aptitudes and challenges," Racicot says. "People in society often think if you've made it to college and grad school, you no longer need assistance. You probably need it more than at any other time."

Since she was 8 years old, Racicot has wanted to become a criminal prosecutor like her father, Gov. Marc Racicot.

"I used to follow Dad around after work, carrying his briefcase and driving him crazy," she says. "I saw through Dad I could help people through law and help society through law."

So far, she's followed in her father's footsteps. The governor earned his juris doctorate from the UM School of Law in 1973 and also earned a bachelor's degree in English from Carroll College in 1970.

Racicot, 24, earned her bachelor's degree in political science from Carroll in 1994. She took a year off school and worked as a legal assistant at the law firm of Datsopoulos, MacDonald and Lind in Missoula.

Racicot describes herself as "strong in will and fragile in physical types of things." She says her father and mother, Theresa, have always encouraged her to do anything she was interested in, even if it seemed impossible.

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"There was a time when I didn't think Ann would learn to rollerskate or tie her shoes," Gov. Racicot says. "She just has an undeniable spirit and a will that has driven her to one success after another."

Coming from a family that places a high value on public service, Racicot hopes one day to be involved in politics. She is interested in the role of attorney general, the office that launched her father's political career, but if given the choice, she'd like to sit on the Supreme Court.

"I would love to be a judge," she says. "I like things where principle is involved."

Racicot's cerebral palsy has left her with brain damage she terms as "extremely slight," in the sense that it doesn't even hit the medical charts. Cerebral palsy is caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain. In Racicot's case it's hard to determine if the damage was caused prenatally or during birth.

She does have some physical challenges including problems with hand-to-eye coordination, gross and fine motor skills and depth perception and balance. She also was born with short, sometimes painfully tight, tendons.

Her only learning disability is a difficulty with abstract theories, which shows up when she works in disciplines such as math. On her high school ACT she scored in the top three percent in English, writing and vocabulary but, as she puts it, "there wasn't even a place on the below-average chart for my math score."

With a little help from the staff at UM's Disability Services for Students, she was able to take her law school entrance exam in an accommodated form, which allowed her extra time to complete the test. Because so few people take accommodated LSATs, Racicot doesn't have a firm comparison to the national average, but says she probably ranks in the 75th or 80th percentile.

"You can be your own greatest handicap by being too stubborn to admit that you need help," Racicot says. "Everyone has a challenge, we just can't see those challenges. I learned that the hard way because I'm a very stubborn person. I spent a lot of time running from my disabilities."

While Racicot downplays her challenges, she works each day to overcome them. For the

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bulk of her life she has undergone physical, occupational and speech therapies. A regimen of daily exercises helps relieve pain from arthritis and tight tendons.

"You learn from the time you start to walk and talk that you have to adapt," she explains. "I'll have to do that the rest of my life."

Born with short achilles tendons, Racicot walked on her toes until age 13, when she had surgery to correct the problem and allow her to walk flat-footed. During recovery, she spent two months in a wheelchair, but she says that physical limitation wasn't nearly as difficult to overcome as her problems with speaking.

By the time she entered middle school, Racicot's stuttering was so bad she could hardly complete a sentence. That's when the Racicot family enlisted the help of UM's speech pathology program. Through the therapy she is now able to "maintain" her speech, she says.

"It's managed, but it's always there," she says of her speech impediment. "I love to talk and I'm very outgoing. I've always wanted to be like Dad, a litigator, talking on my feet and before groups."

Talking in front of groups is one of Racicot's biggest speaking challenges. Singing, however, is no problem.

Racicot found her love of music while in elementary school. "It was the only time I didn't stutter," she explains.

Racicot's four younger brothers and sisters often finished sentences for her. She also recalls being out of breath -- often -- because once she got started speaking, she talked fast to get out as much as she could.

She learned quickly that if she couldn't get her words out by speaking, she could sing them out.

Racicot sang all through her education, including performing the national anthem during sporting events at Carroll and UM. The peak of her singing performances, though, was when she honored her father by singing at his inaugural ball in 1993.

"It was terrifying. I thought I was going to pass out," she says. "But it was great, mom and

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dad were right there before the podium."

Another milestone among her challenges was obtaining a driver's license two years ago.

"It was one of the hardest things for me to learn," Racicot says. "It takes a tremendous amount of coordination. I drive all over now."

Racicot has won her independence through hard work and determination and the support of her family. Her parents are still protective, she says, calling to make sure she is eating, resting and exercising. And, with the heavy workload of law school and a job two nights a week, sometimes she has to tell them no. But in challenging times, when she could feel sorry for herself, she refuses to and says she realizes she's blessed.

Among her inspirations is working with people with brain injuries, including those with severe cerebral palsy. Racicot's first experience working with the disabled came when she was 12 years old and volunteered with the Special Olympics. While she tends to work with people who have more severe disabilities than her own, Racicot says her personal challenges help her relate to them.

"I'm a real intense, impatient person for the most part, except in that part of my life," she says. "I'm impressed by their courage and by their determination and I'm always really thankful for what I have. It's a huge reality check for me.

"Especially when I work with people who have severe cerebral palsy, I realize I'm blessed and things could be so much worse than they were."

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