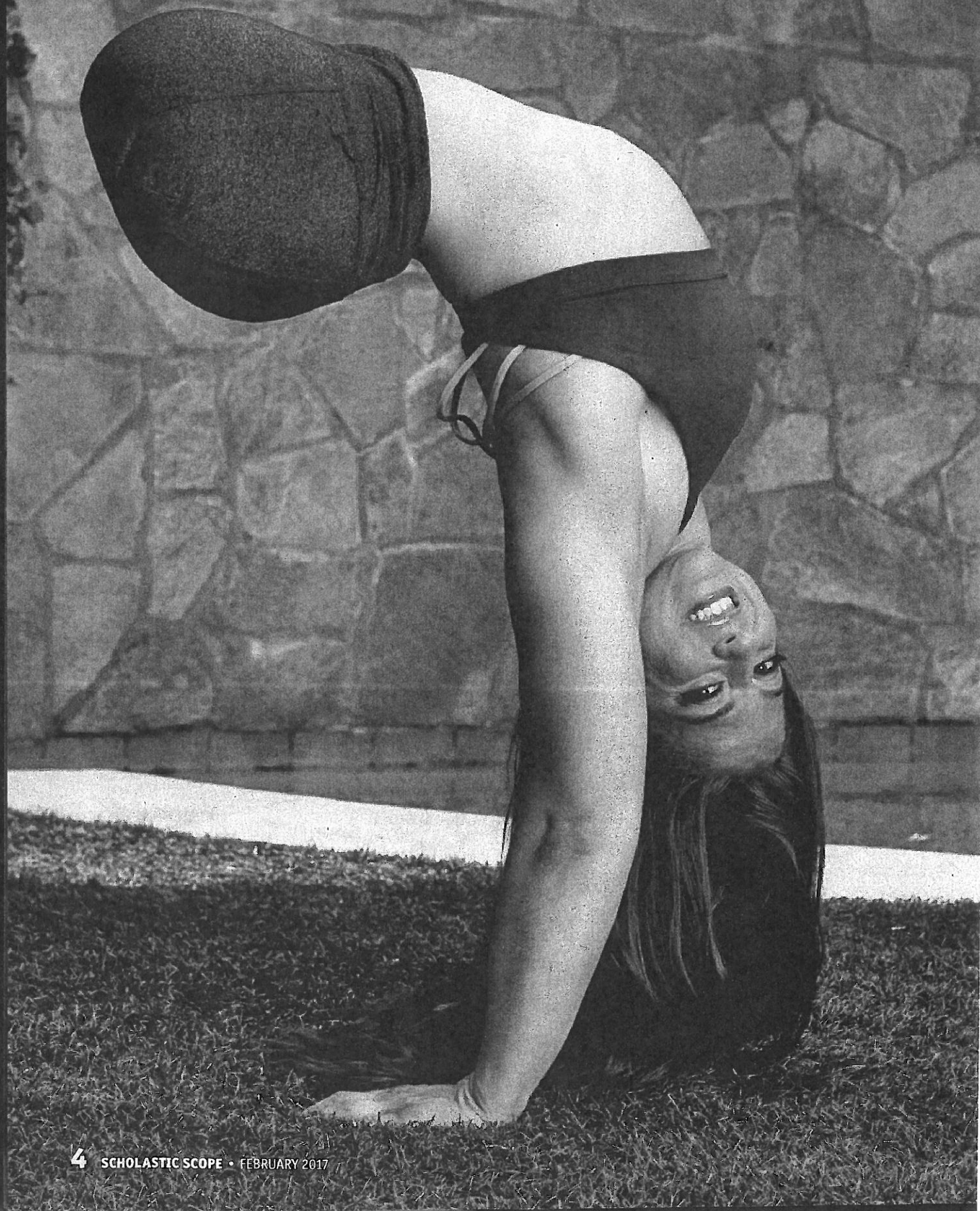


Nonfiction

Jen Bricker



THE AMAZING POWERS OF JEN BRICKER

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction
but it's all true

An incredible story of love, grit, and dreaming big. BY KRISTIN LEWIS

AS YOU READ

Think about the meaning of the title.

Jen Bricker hangs 30 feet above the ground, cocooned in red fabric suspended from the ceiling. The audience gasps as she rolls out of the fabric, unfurling her body like a flag, her long dark hair tumbling down behind her in a wave. She moves with the grace of a ballerina and the strength of a linebacker.

Jen is an aerialist, an acrobat who performs daring feats high in the air. She's appeared on stages from Malaysia to Germany. In the country of Qatar, she made a grand entrance dangling from a hot-air balloon. While on tour with Britney Spears, she performed a high-flying trampoline act. Jen's career is impressive by any measure, but it is all the more extraordinary because Jen was born without legs.

Alone in the World

Jen was born in 1987 in Salem, Illinois. With her big brown eyes and thick black hair, she was adorable. But something was different about her. Because of a **genetic defect**, her legs never formed. Her biological father decided he couldn't handle raising a child with a disability. He insisted on leaving Jen at the hospital, forbidding her mother from even seeing her.

And so Jen came into the world utterly alone: without parents, without even a name.

Special-needs children can be particularly vulnerable; they are statistically harder to place for adoption. Today in the U.S., more than 110,000 special-needs kids are waiting for permanent homes.

Jen's future seemed uncertain at best.

"She Was Ours"

Less than 100 miles from Salem, in the small town of Hardinville, Illinois, lived Gerald and Sharon Bricker and their three sons. The Bricker home was a happy one. Still, Gerald and Sharon felt something was missing from their lives.

They had always wanted a little girl but couldn't have more children. So they decided to adopt one. A friend told them about an infant, born



without legs, who had been placed in a foster home not too far away. The Brickers set out to meet her.

"She was this tiny itty bitty thing," Sharon recalls. "She was so beautiful."

"She just looked up and smiled at us, and she was ours," Gerald says.

Though there wasn't a doubt in their minds that Jen was their daughter, the Brickers wanted to understand what kind of medical care she would need. They consulted with doctors, who painted a bleak picture of what Jen's life would be like. One doctor even suggested Gerald and Sharon carry Jen around in a bucket.

The Brickers didn't come away with a clear idea of what exactly Jen would need, but they were determined that whatever it was, they would find a way to provide it. They knew Jen was destined for a lot more than life in a bucket.

Agile and Fearless

As it turned out, Jen was a natural athlete—**agile** and fearless. She quickly learned to get around using her arms.

Jen "walks" by placing her hands on the ground in front of her, lifting herself up and pulling herself forward. Indeed, Jen is as adept walking on her hands as others are walking on their feet—though she

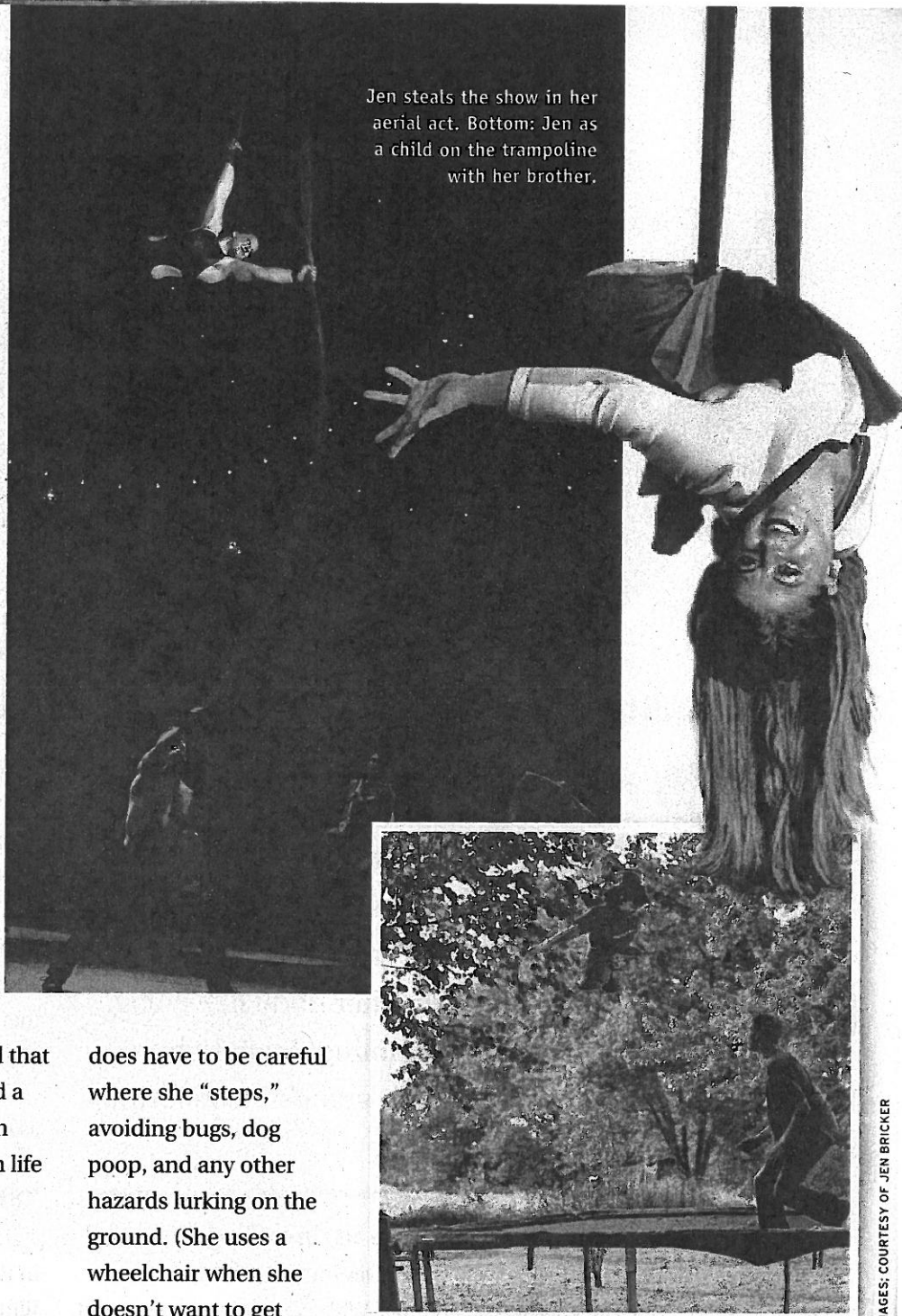
does have to be careful where she "steps," avoiding bugs, dog poop, and any other hazards lurking on the ground. (She uses a wheelchair when she doesn't want to get dirty.) Not surprisingly, her upper body is incredibly strong.

Growing up, Jen was always playing with her big brothers, scurrying up rocks, swimming, and bouncing on the big trampoline in her family's backyard. When she was about 2, a doctor outfitted

her with **prosthetic** legs, but she loathed wearing them, preferring to move on her hands instead.

Can-Do Spirit

Technically, Jen has a "disability," which is defined as a physical or mental condition that



Jen steals the show in her aerial act. Bottom: Jen as a child on the trampoline with her brother.

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BARRY KING/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF JEN BRICKER

limits a person's activities. But Jen says she's fortunate. Growing up, she felt she could do anything she put her mind to—whether it was playing on the volleyball team or stealing the ball on the basketball court.

Jen's positive outlook was **instilled** in her from a young age. "Can't" was never part of her vocabulary. In the Bricker house, the word was simply not allowed.

"We were always telling her, 'You can do anything you want to do,'" Gerald says. "We just had to figure it out and off she'd go."

Perhaps it's not surprising that Jen was something of a **prodigy** in sports. In elementary school, she could speed around the softball diamond on her hands. She snowboarded and fished and rode horses. She even taught herself to roller-skate on her hands.

But gymnastics was where Jen really shone. She started training at a nearby gym when she was 7. She would race down the mat on her hands, launch herself onto the vault, then rocket into the air, flipping with power and ease. When Jen was 11, she took home gold at the state gymnastics championship, beating out the able-bodied gymnasts.

She would often gaze at a poster that hung in her gym—a poster of her idol, 1996 Olympic champ Dominique Moceanu. One day, Jen announced to her family that she was going to go to the Olympics too—just like Dominique.

That may have seemed unlikely, but the Brickers knew their daughter would continue to defy expectations.

A Lot of Attention

Jen's success **garnered** her a lot of attention. Articles were written about her. News crews came to her school to film her. She was even flown to New York City to be on a popular talk show.

At the time, she found the attention bewildering. She remembers thinking, "This is dumb. I am not anything special. Why am I an inspiration to you?"

Like many kids in middle school, Jen sometimes longed to blend in. But as she learned, when you don't have legs, anywhere you go, people are going to notice you.

It Seemed Impossible

During the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia, Jen, who was 8 at the time, sat glued to the television, watching **rapt** as Dominique Moceanu tumbled her way to a gold medal. Long after the Olympics ended, Jen continued to

Jen and her adoptive parents, Gerald and Sharon



admire Dominique. Yet she felt like more than a fan obsessed with a famous athlete. Jen was struck by the similarities between herself and her idol. They were both gymnasts, they were both of Romanian descent, they both had big eyes, tan skin, and long dark hair. Even Jen's mom had to admit that her daughter and Dominique shared an **uncanny** resemblance.

It turns out, that resemblance was not a coincidence.

Seeing Dominique's name on the TV screen during the Olympics, Sharon suddenly remembered something: the name of Jen's biological family. The name had mistakenly been included in Jen's hospital records.

That name was *Moceanu*.

It seemed impossible—and yet it made perfect sense. Jen and Dominique were sisters.

Now What?

Gerald and Sharon decided to wait until Jen was 16 to tell her about Dominique. When they revealed the truth, Jen felt like she was living in a dream.

"The girl I idolized, the girl I watched on TV . . . she's my biological sister?" Jen thought.

It took Jen four years to track down Dominique's address. While searching, Jen discovered that she had another sister, Christina. Finally, in 2007, Jen sat down to write Dominique an old-fashioned letter.

By the time
Dominique—who



had since retired from gymnastics—got to the end of Jen's letter, she was weeping. She immediately called her mom, who confirmed the story. Soon after, Dominique and Jen spoke on the phone. They were overjoyed to have found each other, yet sad to have missed so many years of being in each other's lives.

Everything Is Possible

Today, Jen is 29, and her life has been a whirlwind. She went to college, worked at Disney World, and created an aerial act with another acrobat. She has also forged a close connection with Dominique and Christina.

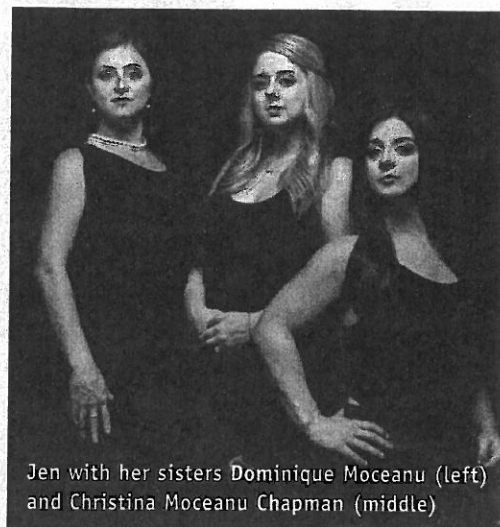
And of course, Jen remains as adventurous as ever—she scuba dives, kayaks, and surfs.

But when asked to reflect on her extraordinary achievements, Jen resists a bit. She insists that there is nothing special about her. That she has no superpowers. That she is just a normal person who works hard and doesn't give up. At the same time, Jen, who credits her faith with helping her overcome challenges, has come to understand that her life is an inspiration to others.

And that may be where her greatest power lies. Because if any of us had to face the obstacles that Jen has faced, wouldn't we

hope to be able to respond exactly as she has? With fearlessness, with hope, with heart?

In the introduction to her new memoir, *Everything Is Possible*, Jen shares a quote from a William Shakespeare play. The line she chose could not be more fitting: "Though she be but little, she is fierce." ●



Jen with her sisters Dominique Moceanu (left) and Christina Moceanu Chapman (middle)

Poem

Read this poem and you'll see why it reminds us of Jen.

Can't BY EDGAR ALBERT GUEST

Can't is the worst word that's written or spoken;
Doing more harm here than slander and lies;
On it is many a strong spirit broken,
And with it many a good purpose dies.
It springs from the lips of the thoughtless each morning
And robs us of courage we need through the day;
It rings in our ears like a timely-sent warning
And laughs when we falter and fall by the way.
Can't is the word that is foe to ambition,
An enemy ambushed to shatter your will;
Its prey is forever the man with a mission
And bows but to courage and patience and skill.
Hate it, with hatred that's deep and undying,
For once it is welcomed 'twill break any man;
Whatever the goal you are seeking, keep trying
And answer this demon by saying: "I can."

EXCERPTED FROM ORIGINAL POEM

WRITING CONTEST

Consider the theme, or big idea, of the poem "Can't." How does it apply to Jen Bricker? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Send it to **I CAN CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *Grace, Gold, and Glory: My Leap of Faith* by Gabrielle Douglas. See page 2 for details.

GABRIELLE DOUGLAS

GET THIS
ACTIVITY
ONLINE

Name: _____ Date: _____

Central Ideas and Details

A central idea of a text is one of the main points the author is making.
(Sometimes a central idea is called a main idea.)

A central idea can always be supported with details from the text.

Directions: Follow the prompts below to explore the central ideas and supporting details in "The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker."

- 1. Read the central idea of the section "Agile and Fearless" stated in the box below. Then check the boxes next to THREE details that best support this central idea.**

Central Idea:
Jen was naturally athletic.

- ☐ "She quickly learned to get around using her arms." (p. 6)
- ☐ "She uses a wheelchair to get around when she doesn't want to get dirty." (p. 6)
- ☐ "Growing up, Jen was always playing with her big brothers, scurrying up rocks, swimming, and bouncing on the big trampoline in her family's backyard." (p. 6)
- ☐ "Jen is as adept walking on her hands as others are walking on their feet . . ." (p. 6)

- 2. Read the details from the section "Can-Do Spirit" listed below. In the box, complete the central idea that these details support.**

Central Idea:

As a kid, Jen was not _____

Detail 1: "When Jen was 11, she took home gold at the state gymnastics championship, beating out the able-bodied gymnasts." (p. 7)

Detail 2: "One day, Jen announced to her family that she was going to go to the Olympics too—just like Dominique." (p. 7)

Detail 3: "Growing up, she felt she could do anything she put her mind to—whether it was playing on the volleyball team or stealing the ball on the basketball court." (p. 7)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Exploring Theme

Directions: After reading the article "The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker" and the poem "Can't," answer the following questions.

1. Complete the sentence below to state the theme, or big idea, of the poem "Can't."

The theme of the poem is that being told that you can't do something, or telling yourself that you can't do something, is _____

2. How does this theme apply to Jen Bricker's life? Write three ideas. Support each with details from the article. (For Idea 1, complete the sentences that we started.)

Idea 1: When Jen was a baby, doctors predicted that her life would be bleak (p. 6). Instead of listening to these doctors and limiting Jen's life, her parents raised her to believe _____. Had Jen and her parents listened to the "can'ts" spoken by the doctors, Jen _____

_____.

Idea 2:

Idea 3:

Name: _____ Date: _____

Summarizing

An objective summary is a short statement or paragraph that tells what an article or a story is about.
It does not include unimportant details or the opinions of the person writing it.

Directions: Follow the prompts in the margins to complete the summary of "The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker."

Jen Bricker is an aerialist who was born without legs. Right after she was born,

A couple who lived nearby, Sharon and Gerald Bricker, went to meet Jen at the foster home in which she had been placed. As soon as the couple saw Jen, _____

and they decided to adopt her. Doctors painted a bleak picture of Jen's future, but Sharon and Gerald _____

_____. Instead of using prosthetics, _____

_____. Growing up, _____

When Jen was 16, she learned _____

Today, Jen _____

2. How did Sharon and Gerald feel about Jen?

4. How does Jen get around?

6. Who came into Jen's life?

1. What happened after Jen was born?

3. What did Jen's adoptive parents raise her to believe?

5. What kinds of activities did Jen participate in as a kid?

7. What is Jen doing today?

Vocabulary Practice

"The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker"

Directions: Below are titles and summaries for imaginary books. Choose the best title for each book. Briefly explain your choices. (There is one title you will not use.)

BOOK TITLES

- A. *The Prodigy*
- B. *Advances in Artificial Limb Technology*
- C. *He's Rapt!*
- D. *Uncanny*

1. Dr. Katherine Haynes discusses the world of cutting-edge prosthetic devices.

Title (A-D): _____ Why I chose this title: _____

2. The autobiography of Richard Derby, who became America's youngest doctor at the age of 12

Title (A-D): _____ Why I chose this title: _____

3. Peter Greene always seems to show up in the right place at the right time. It's as if he can see into the future. But that's impossible— isn't it?

Title (A-D): _____ Why I chose this title: _____

Directions: Answer each question below.

4. Describe a situation in which you would be **rapt**.

5. Steve's father **instilled** in Steve a deep love of camping. Explain how this could have happened.

6. Which could be caused by a **genetic defect**: being born blind or losing your vision in an accident? Explain.

7. Kate says there is something **uncanny** about Steph's singing voice. What might Kate mean?

8. Jared is an actor. During the past year, he has been in a lot of very popular movies. Is it likely that he has **garnered** attention from moviegoers during the past year? Explain.

Name: _____ Date: _____

“The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker” Quiz

Directions: Read “The Amazing Powers of Jen Bricker.” Then answer the questions below.

1. In the opening section of the article, author Kristin Lewis describes Jen Bricker as
 - (A) delicate and weak.
 - (B) strong and beautiful.
 - (C) fierce and competitive.
 - (D) young and fearless.
2. Which line from the article best supports your answer to question 1?
 - (A) “While on tour with Britney Spears, she performed a high-flying trampoline act.” (p. 5)
 - (B) “She’s appeared on stages from Malaysia to Germany.” (p. 5)
 - (C) “She moves with the grace of a ballerina and the strength of a linebacker.” (p. 5)
 - (D) “Jen’s career is impressive by any measure . . .” (p. 5)
3. On page 6, Lewis writes, “As it turned out, Jen was a natural athlete—agile and fearless.” Which detail from the article best supports this statement?
 - (A) “‘Can’t’ was never part of her vocabulary.” (p. 7)
 - (B) “But something was different about her.” (p. 5)
 - (C) “‘She was this tiny itty bitty thing.’” (p. 6)
 - (D) “She would race down the mat on her hands, launch herself onto the vault, then rocket into the air, flipping with power and ease.” (p. 7)
4. On page 7, the line “One day, Jen announced to her family that she was going to go to the Olympics too—just like Dominique”
 - (A) tells you that Jen didn’t feel limited.
 - (B) shows how talented Jen was.
 - (C) demonstrates Jen’s confidence.
 - (D) both A and C
5. Which of the following BEST states the central idea of the poem?
 - (A) Telling yourself you can’t do something is harmful.
 - (B) People should use the word *can’t* more often.
 - (C) The word *can’t* is like an enemy.
 - (D) Using the word *can’t* is rude.
6. The article and the poem both
 - (A) support the idea that positive thinking and confidence are important.
 - (B) emphasize the importance of family.
 - (C) demonstrate that having a disability need not hold a person back.
 - (D) show that anything is possible with determination.

Constructed-Response Questions



Directions: Write your answers to the questions below on the back of this paper or type them up on a computer.

7. Kristin Lewis begins her article by describing one of Jen’s aerial performances. Then Lewis explains that Jen was born without legs. Why do you think Lewis chose to begin her article this way?
8. Helen Keller once wrote, “Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.” What does this quote mean? How does the quote apply to Jen Bricker’s life?