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Activist whose legs are paralyzed campaigns to get amendment on Missouri ballot

Student sees personal stake in stem-cell topic

By **MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS**
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From where Jeff McCaffrey sits — in a wheelchair — he is in the race of his life.

He sees as challengers any groups opposing the advancement of embryonic stem cell research, which McCaffrey believes could some day restore the use of his paralyzed legs.

That is why McCaffrey, 21, a University of Missouri-Kansas City business major, has launched the state's first Student Society for Stem Cell Research at UMKC. He also is rallying interest at other colleges and universities around Missouri.

"Students vote," he said. "We are very politically involved, and I think we will have a tremendous influence."

The Student Society for Stem Cell Research, an international student network dedicated to scientific research for cures, has members in 15 countries and chapters on 15 campuses, including the University of California at Berkeley; Rutgers; Dartmouth; and the University of Michigan.

McCaffrey is a spokesman for the Coalition for Lifesaving Cures, the group leading a petition drive to put a constitutional amendment protecting early stem cell research on the November ballot. The group needs 145,000 signatures from Missouri voters by May 9 to get the measure on the ballot.

If approved, the amendment would permit any stem-cell research allowed by federal law, including laboratory techniques for cloning cells to treat disease and injury. But it would prohibit attempts to produce a fully developed human baby through cloning by making any attempt to implant cloned cells into a woman's uterus a crime.

Last week, the St. Louis-based group Missourians Against Human Cloning launched a campaign to convince voters that the amendment McCaffrey and his student society support would lead to human cloning.

Jaci Winship, executive director of Missourians Against Human Cloning, said her group supported adult stem cell research but was opposed to embryonic stem cell research.

"We would rather see funding go to adult stem cell research where there is promise ... and we don't want to see humans destroyed," said Winship, who lives in St. Louis.

Winship said she expected students who supported her group's position to get involved in efforts to stop the amendment.

Stem cells are the body's repair system. They have the ability to renew themselves and replenish more specialized cells in the body.

McCaffrey's hope is that eventually the research would allow doctors to repair his spinal cord, which would enable him to walk.

Four years ago, McCaffrey, a former captain of the Rockhurst High School football team, was in an auto accident while on leave from the Air Force Academy that nearly severed his spinal cord and left him paralyzed from the waist down.

Two years later, he taught himself to walk on braces to complete a 5K walkathon for juvenile diabetes in Omaha, Neb.

Tightening his stomach muscles to shift his torso left then right and fling his legs in front of him, it took him nearly six hours. His hands were blistered from gripping the walker he used for support.

"When I crossed that finish line, it was a tremendous relief," McCaffrey said.

"But then I realized my cousin, Jackson, who is 9, still has juvenile diabetes and I still have a spinal cord injury. I realized the true finish line is the cure. So now, that is the finish line I strive for every day."

First glance

■ *A business major at UMKC launches a Student Society for Stem Cell Research group.*

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