

# Paralympic medalist tells stories, signs autographs

*Becerra says bronze, silver took hard work*

By **KIMBERLY COFFEEN**  
Staff Reporter

Tuesday wasn't the first time Cheri Becerra had been in a rehabilitation hospital.

When Becerra was four, she was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, an unknown virus that left her in a wheelchair for life.

But on Tuesday, Becerra wasn't a patient. She was a hero.

A four-time Paralympic medalist, Becerra made an appearance Tuesday at the Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital. She was there to sign autographs and talk to others about her experiences at the 1996 Olympics and the Paralympics in Atlanta.

Becerra participated in the Atlanta Olympic games, where she competed in an exhibition race. She also was a competitor in the Aug 19-25 Paralympics, which are for people who are physically challenged.

The 19-year-old Nebraska City native has been competitive in track and recreational swimming throughout her life.

"My brothers, sisters and I always were outside playing sports just like anybody else," Becerra said.

Cheri's mother Mary Becerra said her daughter was not dissuaded by her condition.

"People used to tell me that Cheri was too young and too inexperienced to compete and that most competitors don't even achieve anything the first time anyway," she said.

"Cheri wouldn't listen to this. She worked extra hard and wanted to go for the gold."



SCOTT BRUHN/DN

**LILLIE LLOYD**, a patient at Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital, right, looks at her picture autographed by USA Paralympian Cheri Becerra. Becerra, a Nebraska City resident, won a bronze medal in a 2,500-meter exhibition race at the Olympic games this summer.

It has been two years since Becerra started track wheelchair racing in a regional track meet for high school juniors.

Becerra's racing career has taken off significantly since then. She won five medals — two silver and two bronze in the Paralympics, and one bronze in her Olympic exhibition race. But those weren't Becerra's only honors. She also holds the paralympian women's world record of 54:62 in the 400 meter race, and holds women's U.S. records in the 100, 200, 400 and 800 meter races.

Becerra said she raced in the morning and trained in the afternoon and evening. Becerra was one of the

younger athletes; most competitors are in their mid-to-late-20s. After her hard work, Becerra experienced more than the thrill of victory in Atlanta. She also met several famous U.S. athletes, including decathlete Dan O'Brien, sprinter Michael Johnson, swimmers Amanda Beard and Amy Van Dyken and diver Mary Ellen Clark.

Becerra's mother said she saw her daughter as a dedicated athlete, too.

"I have seen what it takes to make an Olympian," she said. "It takes dedication, the stress of training, being extremely competitive, and to never give up, even if you don't win an event."

About 25 people showed up for the autograph session.

“There are so many things out there for people like myself to do.”

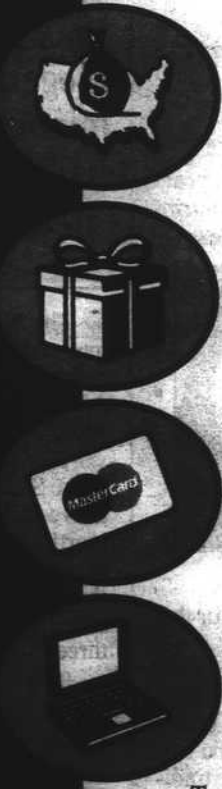
**CHERI BECERRA**  
Paralympian

After the session, Becerra left to compete in a 5 kilometer road race in Boise, Idaho, to raise money for women with cancer. On Sunday, she will participate in the Corporate Cup Run in Omaha.

Becerra, who plans to attend Lincoln Southeast Community College in January, said many people thought the only sport paralympians participated in was wheelchair basketball.

“There are so many things out there for people like myself to do.”

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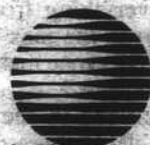
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