She's a tiny little thing, but 3-year-old Sharla Plier of Fredonia, who fearlessly runs on two prosthetic legs and bounces up when she falls, is an inspiration to her family and all who meet her.

Sharla Plier of Fredonia is only 3, but she runs fearlessly to keep up with her siblings and other children—on two prosthetic legs

"The beauty is the way she gets around. It's very neat to see. She works three times as hard to do things, but when she does it, it's really an eye-catcher," her father Scott said as he watched Sharla play with her brother Bryce, 5, and sister Eliana, 9.

"She brings a lot of joy and hope to all of us that anything is possible," her mother Pam said.

Her family calls Sharla's prosthetic legs her "kicks." She will need a new pair every 1-1/2 to two years as she grows.

She got her first pair in January 2010 and her second pair in March this year.

"She basically wore the first pair out," her mother Pam said. "Fortunately, her dad is a toolmaker and can make lots of repairs. She got her second pair in March and literally blew out the back of them."

Her new knee joints are more sophisticated than her first pair.

The prosthetics will be provided at no or very little cost at Shriners Hospitals for Children in Chicago until she turns 18.

Without that help, the medical bills would be staggering, her parents said. They learned about Shriners from a sister-in-law.

“The only thing I knew about the Shriners before is that they wore those funny hats and drove little cars in the Fish Day parade,” Scott said.

“What they do for children and the whole family is incredible,” Pam said.

As much as they appreciate the financial help, the Pliers said the emotional support and unwavering optimism has been just as important as the family struggled through some very rough years and continues to face challenges.

Although Sharla looked perfect when she was born July 21, 2008, an in utero ultrasound revealed there was no tibia in either leg.

The family learned about Sharla’s birth defect about the same time Bryce had surgery for a club foot at Shriners Hospitals in Chicago. He had five casts from Jan. 29, 2008, until he underwent surgery on March 14, 2008. He wore casts or braces for more than a year. Bryce now uses orthotics in his shoe to keep the foot straight.

When the Pliers learned Sharla’s legs could not bear weight, they turned to Bryce’s orthopedic surgeon.

“He knew exactly what it was and gave us such hope that children born with this condition can adapt and live normal lives with prosthetics,” Pam said.

“It’s extremely rare (to have both legs affected). There are only a handful of families in the United States, and we’ve talked to all of them. Unilateral (one leg) is more common.”

The couple made the painful decision to have both of Sharla’s legs amputated through the knee, which isn’t functional but helps hold the prosthetic knee. The surgery was performed Sept. 21, 2009. The 14-month-old was in a cast from her chest to her knees in a reclining position for two weeks.

“That was very uncomfortable for her. She would cry and the only one who could comfort her was her dog Shelby (a boxer-shepherd mix). We would lay her on him and she would fall asleep,” her mother said.

After three months of physical therapy, Sharla got her first prosthetics.

It didn’t take her long to learn to kick her legs, which make a click, to walk, but giving up her “wheels” (walker) took about six months, her family said. She would walk holding someone’s hand or hanging onto the couch, but she refused to walk on her own until her sister stepped in.

“I said, ‘Let’s surprise Mommy and walk by yourself,’” Eliana said.

Standing a few feet away from the couch, she told Sharla to walk to her and she did. After practicing a few times, the girls called their mother.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Pam said. “She walked to Eliana and then to me. She walked back and forth between us, giggling. From then on, she just took off.”

Sharla had to learn how to move her legs to go up and down steps and how to get up by herself if she fell, developing a lot of upper-arm strength in the process.

“All the things we take for granted, she has to learn each of those parts and how to put them all together,” her father said.

Once Sharla was walking on her own, it didn’t take long for her to start running to keep up with her siblings.

Eliana was also the one who taught her brother to run with his braces. He would walk with them, but was hesitant to run.

“I decided one day to teach him to run. I told him he had to catch me,” said Eliana, who started running away and he ran after her.

Eliana said she wants to be an artist and a physical therapist to help children like her sister and brother.

“She’s pretty inspirational to both of the kids,” her mother said. “She has a lot of energy herself, so she’s a good role model.”

Sharla, her sister said, will be a singer or a boss.

“She’s very bossy,” Eliana said. Her parents agreed.

“She’s determined. If she wants something, you know it,” her father said. “But she has to be to do what she does.”

Sharla is outgoing and adventurous with her family, but, like many 3-year-olds, is shy around strangers.

The girl has been in the Birth-to-3 program for children with disabilities since she got her first prosthetics.

All three children will attend Lincoln Elementary School in Port Washington this year.

Run/walk, push/pull to benefit Shriners

More information and registration forms are available at www.supportshriners.com, on Facebook at support shriners or e-mail changedforlife.shriners@gmail.com.