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# FIRST PERSON
# Disabled 16-Year-Old Takes First Steps

## Group collaboration and rehabilitation are key at a school for disabled

Photo: Counterpart International/Kyla Springer

Masha, a disabled student, tends to seedlings with a fellow student at a greenhouse in her school outside Almaty, Kazakhstan.

***Masha, who has walked with crutches for 16 years, took her first steps in 2006 thanks to help from a school outside Almaty that receives USAID assistance.***

Surrounded by lush rows of tiny cucumber and tomato seedlings in the muggy heat of the greenhouse, Masha unravels her arms from her crutches and grabs the wall, stabilizing herself as she prepares to walk to her plot of vegetables with a watering can.

Masha was born with legs that failed to mature and wasn't able to walk throughout her childhood. Now 16, she has been attending a school for disabled children outside Almaty, Kazakhstan for five years. She uses weights and a swimming pool for rehabilitation and spends most of her time outside of class cultivating vegetables, which are sold at a nearby market. This year she has taken her first steps.

"I have more confidence here," Masha says. "My favorite parts are the friends and swimming though," she adds quickly. Her self-assurance is clear as she poses for the camera while planting and helps direct the other students in the greenhouse.

Three of the school's five greenhouses and the pool's wheelchair ramp were built with support from USAID in collaboration with the local community. USAID provides tools and access to people with disabilities and those who advocate on their behalf, such as the parents and teachers that run Masha's school.

"Most of our students have physical disabilities, but some are mentally handicapped too. Taking care of the plants, harvesting and working in the greenhouses — it helps with coordination. Not only that, but they learn to work together," said Ludmila Vladimirova, deputy director of the school. Most of the 300 students at the school did not have these opportunities before, as most schools in Kazakhstan are not accessible to people with disabilities.

"When I'm swimming, I feel like I am flying," says Masha, who gazes off into the sky with a smile. By helping disabled children like Masha see their dreams come true, USAID strives to provide disabled people in Kazakhstan become stronger, more self-sufficient, and confident that they can realize their potential.

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Washington, DC 20523-1000
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