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Emily's Story Finding a way at Harvard

Audio slideshow Part 1:
Finding a path through Harvard Yard

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When Emily Crockett was a child, golfball-sized brain tumors robbed her of her sight and left her partially paralyzed. Doctors told her parents that her next birthday might well be her last. Nearly 14 years later, as a student at Harvard, she would face new challenges that would test her and the university.

Tackling freshman year against the odds

The Boston Globe

By Thomas Farragher, Boston Globe | June 19, 2005

First in a three-part series.

Numbers fly through the late-morning air and Emily Crockett, in a cocoon of shadows, leans forward in her classroom seat and tries to catch them as they sail by.

Vectors and matrices, cosines and coordinates, integers and real numbers.

This is mathematics in multiple dimensions, and even here, among the bright lights of Harvard, the material can be mind-bending.

The teacher is enthusiastic, almost theatrical, effortlessly filling three panels of blackboard with a dense tangle of algebra.

As the figures multiply, Emily sits near the back of the auditorium in historic Harvard Hall — where John Hancock once dined with Lafayette — and struggles to keep them all straight in her head.

More than for most of her classmates, her mind is her dwelling place. It has been her blessing, a repository of rare brilliance. And it has been her betrayer.

When she was just a small child, golf ball-sized malignancies formed near her brain stem. Doctors told her parents to plan for her next birthday as if it would be her last.

The tumor would eventually leave her legally blind, paralyze the left side of her body, and forever shift the axis of her world.

But it had no power to obscure the essence of Emily: Her fierce sense of fairness. Her impish sense of humor.

And her singular determination that her life would not be defined by the malignant star-shaped cells that linger in her brain or by the long, thin cane with which she now navigates the well-groomed quadrangles of Harvard — to her a blur of marble, brick, and green.

“I’ve learned a lot about life,” she wrote in the application essay she sent to the university. “I’ve learned that the future is completely unpredictable, and that we should never take anything for granted. But instead, we should embrace and make the most of whatever we are given because anything, including our lives, may be taken away at any time.”

That hopeful code has proven invaluable since the day last fall when Emily moved to Harvard from her house in Worcester — a simple home of soulful music, mischievous laughter, and middle-class clutter — where her parents ran a relentless support operation, a war room to protect her health and promote her education.

Making her way at Harvard would prove harder than Emily could have imagined when she applied, almost on a whim. There would be health scares, and more surgery. There would be practical hurdles: How do you follow a math lecture when you can’t see the blackboard? And, perhaps hardest to bear, there would be the threat of heartbreaking isolation on a sprawling campus where the academic pace can sometimes outrun compassion.

Not that Harvard left Emily to make it on her own. For the university, this would be a year of patient experimentation and delicate introspection in which boundaries would be tested and how meters of fairness would be recalibrated. How much should be done to help her keep up?

Now, as the math class concludes, students stream out of the lecture hall into a brilliant, late-autumn morning, buzzing about student politics, about a late-night party that broke up just hours earlier, and then scattering down a crowded stairwell.

Emily pulls on a black waistcoat and her backpack and walks alone across bright and blustery Harvard Yard, determined to digest the numbers dancing deep in her head.

Building a mental map

As she steps off the bus at South Station on a humid day in mid-August, Emily hits the tiny button on the side of her wristwatch. “Twelve fifty-three,” a robotic voice announces.

She steps aboard a crowded outbound Red Line train and, after the train sheds some of its passengers, squeezes into a seat. The subway station announcements are on the fritz this day. But Emily has learned to count off the six stops, before stepping briskly off the train at Harvard Square.

Her cane guides her through the station’s turnstile. She walks with a pronounced limp, her left foot held steady in a white plastic brace. Her left hand is withered and tucked against her stomach. And she is smiling.

She is building a mental map, learning the route to the dining hall, to the mathematics building, and to the medical appointments that are part of her daily routine.

She's finding the bathrooms and emergency exits, the laundry room and the mailboxes.

As she stands with her back against a handsome red-brick dormitory, a specialist hired to help her navigate the campus asks: "What is behind you?"

"My house," she replies.

Thayer Hall sits on the northeast corner of what's known as the Old Yard. The 19th-century building was the undergraduate home to the poet e.e. cummings. In just a few days, Emily will live there, too. The 19-year-old graduate of Worcester's Burncoat High School can only begin to imagine her life as a college freshman.

But she's got a plan. She'll join a choral group, the environmental action committee, the young Democrats. She'll hire readers to help her study. She'll relish her new life of independence, finding friends — and help — among students whose talents match her own.

"It is definitely more difficult when you can't see," she says later, as she waits for the bus back to Worcester. "I can't go up to somebody and say, 'Hey, you're in my math class.' But I think one nice thing is that people at Harvard tend to be smart, which means maybe they'll pick up on the fact that I can't see more quickly than other people do."

If Emily is ready — even eager — to leave home, Walter and Valerie Crockett still need time to warm to the idea.

They've watched as their little girl was wheeled into two major brain surgeries. They've looked into the faces of doctors and heard their bleak diagnoses. They've seen Emily grow from a painfully shy child into an accomplished young woman with a weakness for silly jokes, country music, and two lumbering dogs that she treats as children of her own.

They are creative people, folk musicians who raised Emily and her older brother, Jackson, in a home filled with song. They worry now about the silence to come.

"It's going to be an empty house," Walter says. "I'm going to have to deal with Val going nuts."

Emily has learned not to cry. She has little time for self-pity. Her mother is so finely attuned to her daughter's world that in Emily's subtlest gesture or vocal inflection she can detect alarm or annoyance, pain or playfulness.

Now, Valerie Crockett wonders what will replace that intricate relationship as Emily moves away.

"That's my biggest fear: that she'll be socially isolated," Valerie says. "Her happiness has so much impact on her health that I can't stand it when she's not really happy."

Walter has more practical concerns. Emily has a tendency to procrastinate, a habit that can spell ruin at a top-flight college.

And there is something else: He firmly believes that laughter is critical to his daughter's survival. He teases her mercilessly, searching for those smiles. How often will mighty Harvard tickle Emily's funny bone?

Two days later, under a deep blue sky and cotton-ball clouds, the U-Haul sits at the curb outside the Crocketts' home in Worcester. "I hope they mean it when they say waterproof mascara," Valerie says, blinking back tears.

Emily walks out of her bedroom and down the front steps. As she unfolds her collapsible cane, her two dogs, Lilac and Scout, press shiny noses against a front window.

"I think we're all set," Walter says, fumbling with the truck's keys. " Look at those dejected dogs."

A long line of crimson doors

Lost in reverie, Emily strolls through a university returning to life and — for an instant — loses track of where she is.

"I looked up at the trees and the buildings and I thought to myself, 'This looks like those famous pictures,'" she says. "And then I realized: I'm at Harvard! What the heck!"

As she walks to class on this sun-dappled autumn afternoon, the day-old memory provokes a deep belly laugh. It's clear that Emily is a little awed — and warming to undergraduate life.

Classes have just begun, but the place retains the feel of summer camp. Students are feeling each other out, looking for friendly faces in the dining hall. For the most part, Emily eats alone.

With Harvard's blessing, she is taking three classes, one fewer than the standard course load. And she's trying to adjust to life in Room 313.

From the outside it's another crimson door in a long corridor of crimson doors adorned with the names and home states of Harvard's Class of 2008. But there are few freshman rooms like hers. Emily lives alone in a pale-green, three-room suite. Her irregular sleep patterns, and tumor-caused sensitivity to light, require that she live by herself.

In front of a bricked-up fireplace sits a Yamaha keyboard, which Emily plays softly so as not to disturb her third-floor neighbors. The other voices in the room are electronic — the software program that reads her assignments aloud, her books on tape, her talking dictionary.

The setup has obvious liabilities and she knows it. Without a roommate, she has no built-in buddy.

Among family and close friends, Emily is gregarious, funny, a practical joker. Among strangers, however, she is reserved — unerringly polite and proper.

"I've probably introduced myself to like 600 people but I don't have any idea who any of them are," she said in mid-September.

And then, a few days later, one of them introduced himself to her.

Hezzy Smith saw Emily eating alone at a cafeteria table in Annenberg Hall, a vast space of stained glass, oak beams, and walnut paneling that other colleges might use as a museum or a church.

“Hi, my name is Hezzy,” Smith said. “I’m sitting with a bunch of people over here. Would you want to come have dinner with us?”

Smith, a handsome, dark-haired 18-year-old, lives in Thayer, too, and quickly picked up on Emily’s loneliness. He has a younger sister whose name is Emily. She has Down syndrome and has taught him how much pity can wound and what a simple act of inclusion can mean.

Later, back in her room, Emily opened up a bit with Smith, confiding her devotion to country singer Garth Brooks. A foundation for severely ill children helped her meet the music superstar — an encounter she credits with sustaining her will to live. When she had nearly run out of hope, she told Hezzy, Brooks gave her his full attention and then his touring guitar.

“Yeah, but his music stinks,” Smith replied.

And Emily, her adulation for Brooks unaffected, roared with laughter.

“Then she very calmly — in her Emily way — explained to me how powerful his lyrics were and tried to convince me that country music wasn’t bad, but I would have no part of it,” Smith recounted later. “I think a lot of people would have humored her. I know with my sister, you don’t do that. That’s just degrading. I treat her like I treat everyone else.”

Before he left, he took her cellphone and programmed his number into its speed dial. Call me if you need help, he told her.

On his way back to his room, Smith said he asked Emily if she’d had a lot of company.

No, she told him. You’re my first visitor.

“We have these white boards on all the doors,” she recalled. “And he wrote on mine, ‘Don’t be a stranger. Come in and say hi.’”

It was a simple gesture of kindness that she wouldn’t forget.

The preceptor of mathematics

When she was a little girl, spending long afternoons in doctors’ waiting rooms, Emily Crockett would busy herself with equations and word problems her mother devised to divert her from the medical matter of the moment.

At 4, Emily was learning fractions. At 6, she was solving equations with two or three variables.

Valerie tried to make it fun: One dog has three times more bones than another. Another has two fewer than the next. And so on. How many bones does each dog have?

Emily, who loved the dogs, loved the math, too. It would become her passion.

And so there was no doubt that mathematics would be her college major, or “concentration,” as Harvard calls it. But she approached her other course selections with almost-equal vigor. She chose a seminar in public policy analysis and was thrilled

to win a coveted seat in a lecture course about the Supreme Court.

But it is John Boller's class in Room 202 of Harvard Hall — theoretical linear algebra and multivariable calculus — that will command most of Emily's time and attention.

Boller's formal title is preceptor of mathematics, an honorific that is as stilted as he is not. As his 11 a.m. class gathered one Wednesday, Boller chatted easily about the Red Sox's championship season. Then he grabbed a piece of yellow chalk and went to work at the blackboard of the high-ceilinged lecture hall.

"I want to start with a nice, easy Euclidian geometry problem," he began, as his class of about 75 students settled in.

Emily sits by herself in an aisle seat four rows from the back. She leans forward and cradles her cheek and jaw in her right hand. She's just listening. And Boller knows she's there.

He has never taught a blind student before, and he's working with the university's Adaptive Technology Lab — where Emily's written material is converted into formats she can use — to make sure his classwork is accessible to her. During lectures, he knows to say aloud everything he writes on the board and to repeat himself often.

Words like "this" and "that," or "here" or "there" convey nothing to her, so he avoids them.

"What is the angle between vectors?" Boller asks, leaning forward on the balls of his feet.

"Let V be a real vector space," he advises at one point.

When a student wonders: "Shouldn't we define that u cannot be zero," Boller agrees. U cannot be zero.

Emily struggles to keep it all straight.

"The hardest thing is what he teaches us is all based on a certain sequence of steps," she said later. "And to not be able to look back and refer to something that he already said is really difficult. But it's a really fun class. He's an actor. ... He's been really helpful to me."

At mid-term, she's doing B work at Harvard. It's a grade that a year before would have crushed the overachieving high schooler.

"It's really hard and right now I'm kind of lost," she said. "But I'm not the only one who's lost. I've been telling people: I always thought I was good at math, until I came to Harvard."

Elusive search for a foothold

As winter tightened its grip on the quadrangle beneath the windows of her room, there was little left of the buoyant plans Emily had for her freshman year.

She auditioned for the Radcliffe Choral Society. But when rehearsals interfered with her class schedule, she bowed out.

She considered joining the Environmental Action Committee. But the group meets on Thursday nights, when she often is scurrying to complete math homework due each Friday.

And her plans for political activism on campus never gained traction.

Increasingly, Emily finds herself alone in her room — an image that keeps Valerie awake at night.

"Somehow, it's just not working for Emily," Valerie said. "I don't know if she needs to be more aggressive. But she's so afraid of being a pain in the neck and so afraid that someone will say yes out of pity."

Hezzy Smith went to hear Emily sing with her parents when they performed at Club Passim in Harvard Square in mid-October, but they never became close friends.

"I put my number in her phone and she's called me once," Smith said. "I've encouraged her to call me because I'm just one of those people. I'll forget to call or I'll forget to call back. I'm not proud of that, but that's with everybody."

At the dining hall — an engine of socialization for many freshmen — Emily finds nothing to satisfy her finicky appetite except plain pasta; one side effect of her tumor is that fewer foods taste right. So she decides to do without, eating macaroni and cheese and vending machine fare in her room.

In mid-November, there is a brief medical scare. She checks into Tufts-New England Medical Center's emergency room after her shunt — a valve inserted after her tumor surgery that drains excess fluid from her brain — apparently shifted, aggravating her liver. Her back spasms and pain are so severe, she can't reach her cellphone lying near her bed.

The crisis passes, but her loneliness does not.

At nightfall on a frigid winter day, she is sitting on the far end of a well-worn sofa in her room, watching "Jeopardy" on a small television that she can discern with the help of a small telescope pressed against her right eye.

Emily doesn't drink, but as Christmas lights began to twinkle in Harvard Square, she says it would be nice to be able to turn down the offer.

"I already have things going on in my brain," she says. "I don't know what kind of chemical things would happen. But I haven't been offered a single drink since I've been here. That's how bad my social life's been."

Academics consume her. She is taking one class fewer than most freshmen but, her Harvard advisers have figured, it will take her about twice as long to get her work done. And she has fallen behind.

A screen-reading software called "Jaws" helps convert her required texts into a synthesized voice. But Jaws doesn't recognize math symbols, and the software program Emily uses for that has a voice that is hard to understand.

"I can't tell the difference between a 'b' and a 'd' or an 'e' and a 'b,'" she says.

Emily's plan to hire a reader to help her has stalled. Some fellow math students volunteer but can't commit to a firm schedule.

Before that help would arrive, Emily struggles with her math midterm exam. An upper-class math concentrator administers the

test at first, but after a frustrating start, Boller himself steps in. Soon the math teacher finds himself in a test of his own, balancing how much to prompt Emily to fairly compensate for her vision loss and how much to hold back.

"It was," he later explained, "not a, 'Well, what if you did this?' kind of prodding. But, 'Remind me of what you already said.'"

When the grades are scaled, Emily gets a B, placing her, if not in the top half of her class, certainly a member in good standing.

But the experience leaves Boller wondering how this is all going to work. "It's not clear to me," he says. "I think they are definitely significant, the obstacles."

If Boller is feeling his way through unfamiliar academic terrain, soon so too will Harvard administrators.

Just over the horizon lay a medical crisis, a resurgence of head pain that would threaten Emily's freshman year.

It was an emergency that would trigger alarm bells in the family's war room back in Worcester and prompt weeks of soul-searching in Room 313. It would also confront Harvard with a critical question: How much of an assist should this one special student, one among many, get?

"Right now, I am just trying to salvage as much of my education as possible," Emily would later write in an appeal to her freshman dean.

"It has been my lifelong dream to be a math concentrator and I am not willing to give up on that simply because a few obstacles stand in my way. I have conquered a lot to get here. And I am not going to stop fighting now."

Tomorrow: A tumor and its toll.

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