

Extra Effort: Holmen senior thrives despite cerebral palsy



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Emily Medema walks tall — even when it hurts.

It isn't always easy for the Holmen High School Senior who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at 6 months old. After four major surgeries, frequent physical therapies, Botox injections and countless stretching casts, the condition left her with limited use of her left hand and a limp in her gait.

But it hasn't dampened her spirits.

"With cerebral palsy, everything is harder," said Emily, although her cheerful disposition, quirky sense of humor and impressive resume of extra-curricular activities and volunteer experience say otherwise. "But I don't really let anything stop me."

Even everyday tasks such as styling her hair or putting on a pair of skinny jeans are difficult for Emily. At school, she's constantly juggling books between classes. She types her assignments with one hand.

Walking long distances is painful, but she has never asked to be placed in a special physical education class. If anything, Emily's daily challenges have instilled in her a fierce independence and drive to succeed that sets her apart from her peers.

"I don't like asking for help," she said.

Emily learned to be strong at a young age — first for herself, as she learned to live with her cerebral palsy and then for her family when her mother, Kathy, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. As the oldest of three children, Emily took responsibility for comforting her younger sister and brother through an uncertain time.

"She has a very positive attitude," Kathy said. "We did what we needed to do to get through it."

Emily describes her freshman year as "a rough patch" in her life. She was never bullied, but high school is a tough time to be "different," she said.

She stayed busy, joining the basketball team, managing the gymnastics team, taking photos for the yearbook and working at McDonald's after school, but it was a volunteer job at Gundersen Health System that really helped give her some big picture perspective on the struggles in her

own life.

"Delivering flowers to the patients made me look at life differently," Emily said. "You realize how great your life is. I started to open up and not be scared to be who I was. Junior year, I started coming out of my bubble."

Karol Fox, volunteer coordinator at Gundersen Health System, has seen Emily's confidence and curiosity grow over the years. The formerly shy teen transformed into a leader, training the younger volunteers who see her as a role model.

"It's been fantastic to watch her bloom," Fox said. "She's worked through her own issues to become a strong young lady. She sees that she can make a difference."

Emily has been accepted to Viterbo University, where she plans to study human services and business management next year. A four-year member of the marketing club DECA, Emily takes two or three business classes each year — most recently the entrepreneurship class in which students create and operate a model store. Next month, she's starting an internship with Courtesy Corp. in Onalaska and also will be

mentoring students at Hamilton Elementary a few times a week.

"She's amazing," said Patty Shepard, Emily's guidance counselor. "She isn't afraid to try anything."

Other nominees

Carla Alfaro-Castillo

Parent: Jenny Alfaro-Castillo.

College: Western Technical College

Program: Liberal arts transfer program

Caleb Black

Parents: Keith and Cathy Black

College: University of Wisconsin-Stout

Program: Engineering

Derrick Collins

Parents: The late Todd and Nancy Collins

Guardians: Joel and Colleen Winjum

College: Western Technical College

Program: Welding

Jeffrey Collins

Parents: The late Todd and Nancy Collins

Guardians: Joel and Colleen Winjum

College: Undecided

Program: Computer science

Mark Collins

Parents: Steve and Jeanne Fore

College: Undecided

Program: Animal behavioral science

Jasu Lor

Parents: Xang Lor and Shua Vue Lor

College: Western Technical College

Program: Computer engineering technology

Ashley Phelps

Parents: Phil and Colleen Phelps

College: Western Technical College

Program: Culinary arts

Paul Skalicky

Guardians: Jonathan Maye and Laurie Café

College: Western Technical College

Program: Massage therapy

Linda Vang

Parents: Tong Chai Vang and Bliia Lor

College: UW-Green Bay

Program: Human biology

Chong Yee Xiong

Parents: Kee Xiong and Soua Thao

College: Western Technical College

Program Liberal arts transfer program

Timothy Yang

Parents: See and May Yang

College: Western Technical College

Program: Liberal arts transfer program

About the program

The Tribune Extra Effort Award program is designed to recognize high school seniors who have persevered to overcome obstacles or performed outstanding service. It is a partnership with the La Crosse Tribune, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Viterbo University, Western Technical College, AAUW, the Franke Foundation, the law firm of Johns, Flaherty and Collins, S.C., Trust Point, Jerry Raddatz, and Fred and Ruth Kurtz.