

Heart of a Champion

EMILY MCGARRY '20 REFUSES TO LET
HER LIMITATIONS STOP HER



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The Unstoppable Emily McG

SENIOR CHALLENGES SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS AS A CHEERLEADER AND IN LIFE

Growing up, people have many opportunities to pursue the sport they love. It's not that simple for Emily McGarry '20.

McGarry was born with a disability in her legs with an unknown cause, meaning she spends much of her time in a wheelchair.

Going into seventh grade, McGarry tentatively made the decision to join an adaptive cheerleading team. "I was unsure if I wanted to join the special abilities team or just the regular half-year team," she said. "[The coach] had me try out with the special abilities team, and I was a flyer."

Soon after, she fell in love with it. "I'm a specialty flyer, so I fly in the opening and then in dance, and then in tumbling," McGarry said.

Over time, a welcoming and understanding environment helped McGarry grow, express herself, and gave her the opportunity to participate in the sport she loves at a competitive level.

Her twin sister Gwen McGarry '20 has always stood by her side.

"From a family standpoint and a coach standpoint, I think that at least what I've seen in Emily is she's become a lot more competent and confident in her abilities," Gwen said.

"It's a really inclusive environment and everyone kind of understands what you're going through because they too don't connect with the normal crowd," McGarry said. "It's just a really nice experience, and it helped me become the person I am right now."

Special abilities, or adaptive, sports teams work with differently-abled people to make athletics accessible.

"Special athletic teams are definitely different because it takes longer for them to get up, so instead of having one practice, you typically have to spend a couple of practices learning just that type of routine, and then it just takes them longer to build muscle memory," McGarry said.

She has been part of the special abilities cheer team at Cheer Central Suns in Lafayette for about five years now. The journey hasn't always been easy, but the hard work has definitely paid off.

"This past season we were selected to represent the United States of America as the US Special Abilities National Traditional Team, so that was super cool," McGarry said. "It's hosted by the Olympics, I think, so there was a whole opening ceremony where we walked across the stage with our flags and super cool warm ups. We

competed against other countries and won a gold medal."

However, achievements take persistence and hard work. "We had a lot of extra practices," McGarry said. "Normally, we practice twice a week, Monday and Wednesday for two hours each day, and then occasionally we have extra practices on the weekends. We had a lot of morning practices and all day practices for this competition."

Being on the team has changed McGarry in many ways. Her self-esteem increased and she felt proud of what she was doing. "This team has definitely had an impact on me because it's something I'm very proud of," McGarry said. "I'm more comfortable with myself because of this super awesome thing that I can do."

Gwen has seen how cheer has influenced Emily's journey as well, both in her relationships and in how she perceives herself.

"Now Emily's this independent, strong woman and that's been really cool for my whole family to see that she's strong and not ashamed to be disabled anymore," Gwen said. "She's confident in who she is. And that's been really cool as a family to see her love herself as much as we love her."

Despite all the struggles she faces, cheering has given her a place where she can feel connected. "I've experienced a lot of special memories on the team that I wouldn't have gotten to do with other teams, so it's just a really great experience."



56.7 million people in the United States have some sort of disability

participants in adaptive sports whose lives are positively impacted
79.3%

1 adaptive team at MOHI

The amount of the population with a disability is about
20%

The year adaptive sports were first included in the London Winter Olympics

1948

32 million Americans have functional limitations

5600 annual participants in adaptive sports

Statistics according to American Association of Adaptive Sports



Sister Support

Behind Emily's journey is a supportive family, especially her twin sister Gwen McGarry '20.

"From what I've seen since when we started middle school, she didn't have a ton of friends, and she was really shy," Gwen McGarry said. "Then, when she started cheering, I think it was seventh grade, she just became a lot more confident and she became a lot stronger emotionally."

Gwen was born without the physical disability that Emily has, but as Emily's twin, she's experienced

Emily's life secondhand, and that comes with seeing the way people look at her.

"A lot of people look at her as just 'Oh, that girl in the wheelchair,' but when she's cheerleading she's so much more than that," Gwen said. "For the first time, I think she believes it, too. She's not just someone who's disabled. It gives her a way to express herself and escape from that title of disabled person."

November 19