Sarah's Hope

Teen's ambition overcomes family, personal challenges

By ERIC ADLER - The Kansas City Star

Friday, March 29, 1996.

Sarah Clark knows what they think. The smirks. The laughs. The way the other girls, all week long in cheerleading practice, have been rolling their eyes. They think she's a joke.

They think she's a big fat joke of an eighth-grader with no prayer of becoming a high school cheerleader.

Minutes before her tryout, Sarah paces the corridor of F.L. Schlagle High School just steps from the gymnasium where the judges wait. She sweeps the waves of her long copper hair back over her shoulders. She tugs up on her socks and down on her cheerleading skirt, pressed the night before. She checks her laces. They're tied. No jewelry. They said no jewelry.

Then, with her eyes open and in the privacy of her mind, she mutters a prayer. *Dear God, please...*

By 8 p.m. she'll have her answer.

Please, she prays, she'll never ask for anything ever again. She just wants something, something in her life that's... different. Nice.

Yes. That's it. Nice. She wants a life like the ones *cheerleaders* have. Like the ones she sees on television and in movies where the girls are always so pretty and popular and happy and lead lives so much better than her own. Maybe it's a fiction. Still, she wants it.

And it's not because she's 13 years old and heavy, either. At 5 feet 2 inches and 200 pounds, she's lost count of the number of times she forced herself not to cry as kids called her "pig" and "cow" and names just as stinging. The girls in the gym may think that's the reason she's trying out. It's not.

Being fat is the least of her concerns. So many people think high school students face only the most trivial worries: whether they have the right clothes, the right car, a date on Friday night. They forget about the kids, like Sarah, who bring baggage to school that makes every day a struggle against unthinkable odds.

Yet some of these kids find ways to succeed. If Sarah makes the cheerleading team, maybe, just maybe, it won't be so hard to shoulder the other weights she carries, she thinks.

There's her father, Patrick Clark. A thief, a drunk and a transient, he's serving 12 years in a California prison for trying to molest a 10-year-old girl at a McDonald's. When Sarah was a toddler, he beat her mom's face black with bruises. They ran crying to a women's shelter. One of Sarah's nicest childhood memories is playing with the wild kittens in the woods behind the shelter.

Then there's Randy Wright, 38, her stepfather. Lanky and easygoing, Randy, until recently, was a great dad. He wasn't anything like that one boyfriend of her mom's who used to slap Sarah when she was a toddler and then press her face into a pillow to stop the crying.

No, before Randy began doing drugs and drinking, he was a good guy with a steady maintenance job and a nice Dutch colonial in the Westheight neighborhood. And he was good to her younger brothers, too, and to her mom, Andrea.

In recent years, though, he's begun doing crazy things, like the night he held a shotgun and threatened to blow out Andrea's brains if she wouldn't have sex with him.

But Sarah's greatest weight by far, and what drives her, is her mother. Sarah fears she'll end up just like her. Living in dumps. Attracting losers. Getting lost in drugs. Amounting to nothing.

Andrea Wright — a short, bell-shaped, 38-year-old high-school dropout — grew up feeling worthless. By 16, she'd run away from home twice. The drugs and abusive men followed.

Sarah has resolved her life will be different. Whatever it takes, she isn't going to be nothing.

So in school she earns A's, because A's are not nothing; they are something. They come easily to her. With them, Sarah gets respect, smiles from her teachers and notes on her report cards. "What a pleasure Sarah is to have in class."

In seventh grade at Central Middle School, when she tried out and made the eighth-grade junior high cheerleading squad, that wasn't nothing either. It was 180 degrees as far away from nothing as Sarah had ever gotten.

Her flexibility, her ability to sink effortlessly into a split, surprised everyone. It gave her new confidence. On game days, sitting in class in her blue and red cheerleading skirt, she felt popular. In the halls, when kids called her name,"Hey, Sarah!" and saw her at games, "Way to go, Sarah!" she felt important.

But now it's not Central Middle School. It's Schlagle High, an urban street-tough school on the outer edge of the industrial landscape of Kansas City, Kan. Student body: 1,000. Home of the blue and gold Stallions. Two-time state basketball champions. Alma mater of sprinter Maurice Greene, the world's fastest human.

And it's where, over the next four years, Sarah's story will play out. As she gets ready for her freshman year, her goal is to make the cheerleading squad. But that struggle will pale in comparison with the grueling journey ahead as she fights to survive high school.

"Get ready, girls," says Kerry Norbury, the cheerleading coach.

It's time. The judges are ready.

Sarah and two other girls snap into single file, bouncing on their toes, warming up for their entrance. They're among

the last of the 80 or so girls trying out.

One of the girls in her group is Gretchen Lane. She looks like a gazelle.

Her limbs are sleek, her upper body lean like a ballerina's. The other girl is cute and bubbly, but no Gretchen Lane. Compared with Gretchen, Sarah feels like a Coke machine.

"If you mess up, just keep going," Norbury says. She tries to inspire them, pouring on her brand of encouragement.

"Smile."

"Don't cry."

"No, you won't throw up."

"Hang in there." She yanks open the door. A gust of gym air hits them. Sweat. Rubber soles. Court wax.

"I may be fat," Sarah thinks, "but I can cheer."

Smiling, pumping her arms over her head, Sarah and the others spring into the gym, cheering as if the panel of five judges is a crowd of 5,000.

"GO SCHLAGLE! LET'S GO BIG BLUE!"

Twelve minutes later it is over.

With a whomp, the gym doors jolt open. Sarah and the others prance out as peppy as popcorn, stabbing their fists skyward in a last push to impress the judges.

But two steps out the door, she stops as if slapped, and ambles into the corridor, her face tense with worry.

A mistake! Damn. She made a mistake on the dance.

Did they see it?

Maybe it won't count. One bad arm movement. Stab *up! Left!*

She was nervous. And it was just in the beginning.

They won't count it. They can't. Everything else, *everything*, the group cheer, the group chant — "Go Stallions go! (clap, clap) Go Stallions..." — went just right.

Girl-number-one-please-turn-and-show-us...

Girl-number-two-please-turn-and-show-us...

Girl-number-three...

She was perfect. Her spread eagle jump. Legs straight to the sides. Toes pointed. Her side Herkie jump. Face forward. One leg straight out. Other bent back.

Individual cheer, individual chant — "A-a-a-a-aim for Victory...." Her front Herkie jump and the way she just slid into her full split. Why doesn't anyone think she can ever do that? Not even Gretchen —

Gretchen! Why did she have to be the one next to Gretchen?

On the way home, Sarah tallies the numbers in her head. Eighty-some tryouts. Three squads. How many were going for freshman? Twenty? Thirty? She can't remember.

But there are also grades, class attendance, teacher recommendations.

Talent counts, sure. But Norbury told the girls, said it like a drill sergeant, grades are big. Very big.

She doesn't care if you're Barbie, Jackie Joyner-Kersee or if you can leap a goal post in a single bound, she said. Wearing the Schlagle blue and gold isn't about popularity, it's about being a school ambassador.

And in the end, it's about points. Not names or looks, but how it all — talent, grades, everything — adds up. And there are no guarantees. No shoe-ins from one year to the next. It's all anonymous. All coded. You aren't a name, you're a number.

If you don't get the points, you're out.

If you get them...

"The senior cheerleaders will make the calls between 7 and 8 tonight," Norbury said. "If you haven't made it, you won't get a call."

Back home, Sarah marches through the door.

"Stay off the phone. No one can use the phone!" she shouts as she makes her way to her mother's bedroom.

Barely stopping, she kicks off one sneaker, flips the heel off the other and sinks crossed-legged onto her mother's waterbed. She plops the phone in front of her and stares at it.

7:15...7:20...

Andrea, her mother, is at work at the Hen House deli. Randy and her brothers Brian, 11, and Jordan, 6, turn on the television. They flip through the stations.

"Diagnosis Murder." "Family Matters."

7:30.

"Boy Meets World."

At 7:45 reality begins setting in. They're not going to call, Sarah thinks.

She slides off the bed and walks out of the bedroom. Maybe her chances weren't that good anyway. She did her best.

Riiiiiiiing

"Pick up the phone!" she yells, rushing back to the bedroom. If it's one of Brian's friends, she'll murder him. She hears Randy answer.

"Hello?" He turns to Sarah. "It's for you."

Sarah's heart stops. She puts her ear to the phone. The senior cheerleader on the other end is exuberant.

"Congratulations..."

Friday, Sept. 20, 1996. About 9:30 p.m.

Sarah and her friend Trisha stand in the parking lot flirting with a couple of cute guys. She's wearing her blue and gold cheerleading uniform, and when she smiles her cheeks turn as round as golf balls.

From where she stands, she can see the football field, all but empty now, glowing a luminescent green beneath the stadium lights. Schlagle has just lost its third game of the year to Truman High, a heartbreaker, 28-26. But Sarah doesn't care. She's having so much fun it almost makes up for all the grief she's been getting ever since she made the Schlagle squad.

Kids at pep rallies mooing at her, laughing at her. Parents complaining to the cheerleading coach. Why didn't my daughter make the squad when you have that fat so-and-so? Mostly, Sarah ignores them. She made the team. And if they

don't like it, that's their tough luck. They aren't going to get her tears. Making cheerleader has been the best thing that's ever happened to her.

All summer long, she's looked forward to nights like this. The day she got her uniform, she held it like a trophy. At cheerleading practice during the summer, she envisioned herself under the lights at the stadium cheering before a buoyant crowd. If the rest of high school is like tonight, it's going to be great.

Within a few minutes, Sarah sees her stepfather Randy's rusted Datsun roll into the parking lot. She and Trisha walk to the car. Trisha gets in the back. Sarah sits in the front.

That's when the smell of whiskey hits her.

Randy wheels out of the parking lot. As he talks, Sarah knows he's drunk. His speech is muddled. He seems agitated. And he's headed the wrong way.

"Randy," she says. "Where are you going?"

He doesn't answer. He drives on.

She asks again.

"Randy..."

"Shut up," he yells.

"Randy," she pleads, "take us home."

But with his brain embalmed in anger, resentment and a fifth of McCormick whiskey, Sarah's stepdad is now too delirious to listen.

He just lost his job. His marriage to Sarah's mom is rotting away. And he says if Sarah and her friend don't shut up, he's going to grab the gun he has tucked under the car seat and blow Sarah and her friend away.

"I'm going to kill you both," he shouts, digging beneath the seat and steering his car into the night. "I'm going to kill you and dump your bodies where no one will find you!"

In the back seat, Trisha is shaking, weeping. Up front, Sarah, still in her cheerleading uniform, sits glued to her seat.

Through the windshield, she can see the neighborhood. Quindaro Boulevard. Dim. Menacing. Crack houses. Windowless bars. Tenements boarded with plywood.

Again, Sarah and Trisha implore Randy.

"Randy, stop it. Please!"

Again, he refuses.

Gradually, though, the malignant landscape begins to change.

15th Street...16th. Familiar scenery flashes by.

At 1211 N. 19th St., the car lurches to a stop at the curb. They are home. Sarah and Trisha shove open the doors and scramble across the lawn. They dash up four concrete steps, across the front porch and into the house. They slam the front door and turn the lock.

BOOM. Randy's foot lands like a battering ram.

"Let me in!" he screams. "Let me in!"

BOOM. Sarah's mom jumps up from the couch and dials 911. Trisha calls home. Toby, her mom's boyfriend, is rushing over.

Again, Randy hurls a kick. Sarah, her mom, her brothers and Trisha press themselves against the door. Then, in an explosion of glass, Randy's fist smashes through one of the windows flanking the door, sending shards of glass flying.

Randy claws at the lock inside. Sarah begins punching at the hand of the best and only real dad she's ever known.

Another kick. The door jamb cracks.

Where are the police?

Then...a momentary silence.

A voice. Outside. A man's distant voice.

Trisha's mother's boyfriend has pulled up. He calls Randy away from the door.

"Now! Get out! Let's go!" Sarah's mom yells. "Get in the van! Get in the van!"

Sarah and Trisha yank open the door and bolt. Sarah's mom follows with the keys. But outside, Randy spots her and charges.

Now it's a race to the minivan. Andrea wins.

Inside, she locks the doors and cranks the engine. With one blow of his fists, Randy smashes the windshield into a crystalline mosaic.

Andrea peels out.

Soon, the neighborhood lights up with police cars, inflaming Randy all the more.

The police subdue him. They slap handcuffs on his wrists and press him into the back seat of a Crown Victoria.

Inside, kicking and spitting mad, he sucks gobs of mucous from his sinuses and thwacks wads of it down the inside of the front windshield. He then rolls on his back, cocks his legs, and boots out the rear left window.

As Randy is taken away, the police take statements from Sarah and her family.

It's after 1 a.m. by the time Sarah finishes.

Wearily, she walks into her bedroom and changes out of her cheerleading skirt.

Sarah Surviving

In the cold and dark, KCK teen-ager struggles to keep her dream alive

By ERIC ADLER - The Kansas City Star

October 17, 1996.

No way. It's too unbelievable. It can't be right.

Sarah Clark, 14, holds the check in her hand.

Look again, her mother says. It's got to be a mistake. Check the name.

But there it is, printed in black ink.

Pay to the order of Sarah Clark $22,788.

And Brian has one, too. For $24,516.

The Social Security Administration has just mailed Sarah and her 12-year-old brother nearly $50,000. Back money owed the kids from the time their biological dad died.

"But he's not dead as far as I know," Andrea Wright, 38, tells the lady when she calls Social Security. "He's locked up in jail in California." Which he is.

But the lady says, according to their records, Patrick Clark died way back in 1991. The money is theirs.

What a weird turn of events. So weird, it's hard for Sarah to grasp.

A month ago she thought she might die. One minute she's a freshman flirting with some cute guys after a Schlagle football game. The next Randy, her drunken stepfather, is holding her captive on a terrifying car ride through Kansas City, Kan. He says he has a gun. He says he will kill her.

Now Randy's in jail. He'll be locked up for 26 months.

And Sarah, for the first time, has real money to help fulfill her dreams. Of going to college. Of leaving this life behind. Of maybe, even, becoming a lawyer.

Sometimes Sarah can even see it: "Everything I always wanted but didn't know I wanted."

"I see myself having my own law firm," she says, "and a great house and a perfect family. And I want two kids, maybe three. But I want twins, identical twin girls. I see little redheads playing in the park and having fun. The house, my house, is in the country, with horses and stables and lots of land, lots of trees, lots of space."

And Sarah sees something else, too. But it's a dream she's only begun to envision.

At the end of it, she's wearing a cap and gown. All around her, as she walks on stage, her high school classmates and family are cheering. At a microphone, a teacher announces Sarah's name. She's first in her class.

Sarah Clark. Cheerleader. Valedictorian.

And why not? With Randy in jail, with A's on her tests and with all that money in the bank, what could possibly stop her now?

"Hey," Sarah's mom suggests. "What do you say we go shopping?"

Sarah's all for it.

She likes nice things, pretty things, even though she doesn't have many, or maybe because of it. She takes care to look pretty.

On school mornings she rises early enough so she doesn't have to rush when putting on her foundation, lipstick, mascara and eyeliner. Sarah likes her makeup to appear light and natural, heavier around the eyes, but not too heavy.

She wants to feel attractive in a way her mother never did. For although she may hate her mother's life, she doesn't hate her mother. She knows her mother loves her. Much of the time Sarah even pities Andrea, abandoned with her 3-year-old sister, Denise, at a Kansas City orphanage when she was 18 months old.

Sarah knows the story well. How Andrea was just a baby, a dark-haired Mexican girl, whose birth mother didn't want her. How, even after she was adopted by Charles Lombrano, a Mexican-American grain inspector, and his German-American wife, Doris, she never felt accepted or loved or good enough. Not next to her sister. Not next to Denise.

While Denise was thin, Andrea was fat.

While Denise was studious, logical and independent, Andrea was none of those things. She was a sensitive romantic who laughed until her crescent eyes shut and who desperately wanted to be liked.

Instead, she got criticized, constantly.

Andy, you'd be so pretty if ....

Andy, you'll never get a man until ...

"Mom was hard on her weight. Everybody was, and it hurt her," Denise Nasternak, Andrea's sister, said.

But by 16, Andrea began proving her mother wrong, at least on one account.

She began getting men, plenty. She also began getting high, plenty.

She ran away from home twice. Then she dropped out of high school. At 21, she met Sarah's dad who, in the course of their five-year marriage, repeatedly beat her. He broke her nose. He broke her jaw. Finally she ran away with Sarah when she was 3 and Brian, 1, was still in diapers.

Now not only is Andrea's second husband, Randy, in jail, but also two weeks ago Andrea's mother died of cancer. So as far as a little shopping spree goes, Sarah figures her mom deserves it. They all do.

Quickly they fill their Dutch Colonial house in Westheight with more than $6,000 in clothes and furniture. New couch. Love seat. End tables. Computer. VCR. Thirty-six-inch TV. Sega system. CD stereo. Bunk beds for the boys.

Then, as an extra treat to herself, Sarah's mom heads to the Missouri River casinos.

And then she goes again ... and again ... and again.

Soon Sarah and the boys barely see their mother anymore.

During the day they're in school. Overnight Andrea's working the red-eye shift at Hen House. The rest of the time she's with Mike Scrivo, a new boyfriend she met at the casinos.

Half-Italian, half-Korean, Mike, 48, has the lean musculature of a middleweight and the carved face of a Mongolian warrior. He makes van deliveries for an airport courier service. Andrea thinks he dropped from heaven.

Sarah detests him.

She blames him for coming between them and their mother.

Months pass — November, December, March, April — and Andrea is getting skinnier.

She's becoming more scattered. Sarah says it's because her mom's doing more drugs than ever. Pot. Crank. Speed. But Andrea says that's not the case. She denies doing crank and speed and blames her weight loss on depression over Randy being in jail and her mother's death.

All around the house, Sarah finds the casino receipts:

Harrah's: $300.

Harrah's: $500.

Argosy: $300.

Mike took Andrea to Las Vegas for her 39th birthday. He said he'd pay. And he did, for the airfare and hotels. But how much did her mother lose? And what about Sarah's plans for college? Everything had been going so well.

In May 1997, with seven A's and two B's, Sarah ends her freshman year ranked near the top of her class. Again, she's made cheerleader.

On June 12, one month later, the electricity goes off. Andrea hasn't paid the bills in six months.

A winter night. February 1998.

Sarah, 15, and her younger brothers huddle like campers around a kerosene heater in the center of their living room. To keep out the cold, Sarah has nailed a sheet over the room's only entryway. The room feels warm, but it's heavy with darkness.

A wavering light shines from the heater's red flame. A few flickering candles cast large shadows against the walls. Lying on the couch, Sarah reads by flashlight.

It's been eight months since the utility company got tired of waiting to be paid and turned off the lights, the stove, the heat, all the power to the house. Not long after that, the water went, too.

In the mornings Sarah and her brothers heat pots of bottled water on the kerosene stove and pour them into the bath. They pour more in the tank to flush the toilet.

Too humiliated, too embarrassed, she has managed to keep her circumstances a secret, telling virtually no one. One friend came to pick her up the other day. Sarah met her outside. Another, Rachel Vernon, wanted to stop by to hang out.

"My mom is in a bad mood," Sarah said. "She doesn't want anyone over."

Truth is, Sarah's mom is rarely around anymore. When Andrea does show up, it's often near midnight to bring the kids a dinner of sandwiches or fast food. Sarah and her brothers have been living off McDonald's, Burger King and Taco Bell for months.

Andrea has been gone so much, Sarah's youngest brother, Jordan, 8, sometimes slips and calls Sarah "Mom."

"Mom, I'm cold."

"Mom, can you check my homework?"

Sarah does it, occasionally by flashlight. At night she puts Jordan to bed on the couch. In the mornings she and Brian make sure he's warm and dressed in clean clothes before he heads to school.

Then, in the afternoons and evenings, she puts on her Schlagle Stallions uniform and cheers for her classmates.

This is Sarah's sophomore year. Whatever homework Sarah has, she does at school. Her grades are nearly perfect.

Of course, she knows by now that the Social Security windfall is gone. Every cent. Fifty thousand dollars. Blown on gambling or drugs or who knows what else. Andrea says she used most of it to pay back bills. Sarah doesn't believe it.

Almost all their new toys are gone, too. Big-screen TV. CD stereo. Computer.

A burglar stole everything in January. Besides being cold and dark, the house is now empty.

Sarah and the boys do have one portable TV left, though. It has a 5-inch screen and plugs into a car cigarette lighter. Sometimes Sarah and the boys go outside to the van to watch it.

And sometimes Sarah wonders what it must look like to those who see them. Three kids sitting in a van, in the night, their faces illuminated by the tiniest of lights.

Late May 1998. Four months later.

Outside their house, Sarah, Brian and Jordan sit in police squad cars. The officer is blunt.

You're not sleeping here again, he tells the kids. If a responsible adult isn't here to get you in 30 minutes, we're calling child protective services.

At last. Someone called the authorities.

Sarah is relieved. They've been living with no heat or lights for close to a year. For a long time Sarah hoped her mother would come to her senses and start paying the bills.

Sarah knows her mom must have some money. Andrea still works at Hen House. Plus, long before Social Security sent Sarah and Brian the $50,000, the agency had been sending them benefit checks totaling nearly $1,000 a month. The money should come until they turn 18.

But every time Sarah confronts her mother, Andrea says she's paying the bills. She has some left, she says. But she's saving it for Sarah's college.

"College? Forget college," Sarah screamed during an argument. "I'd rather *live* than go to college!"

The day Sarah found out her mother was having the money mailed to her own post office box is the day her

burden felt the heaviest. And she knew: Her mother would never change.

Like always, it was up to Sarah.

For the third year in a row, she had made the cheerleading squad. The taunting had subsided. She had made friends and, with her grades at the end of her sophomore year, the National Honor Society.

Honors English A
TV Production A-
Honors Algebra A
Biology A\
World History A
Spanish A
Intro Computer A
Consumer Resource Management B-

She's among the top three in her class. But now she's homeless.

Sarah's Hope: Final Installment

On the brink of graduation, Sarah's burdens take their toll

By ERIC ADLER The Kansas City Star

Sept. 18, 1999. Senior year.

Turn up the music.

Pass the chips.

It's 11 at night, and Sarah Clark's party is rolling.

All around, her friends are gabbing and laughing.

At last Sarah feels like a carefree teen. Still, she doesn't want to push it. "Not in my grandfather's house," she cautions a friend who pulls out a joint. "Smoke it out back."

Sixteen months ago Sarah, 17, was living in an empty house with no heat. No water. No lights. She read by flashlight. But ever since she and her brother, Brian, 15, moved in with their grandfather, life's been better than it has been in a long time.

Her junior year grades were perfect: eight courses, eight A's. She scored 19 out of 35 on the ACT, her college entrance exam. Not great, but not too shabby, considering she was sick and didn't study.

"I'll take them again," she says. "I'm thinking of going to Wash U in St. Louis or Loyola or maybe Harvard. But I know the scores will have to be better if I want get in there."

Four years ago, when Sarah sprinted onto the gym floor at F.L. Schlagle High School, kids laughed at the preposterous, overweight girl who dared to try out for cheerleader. But no one knew how driven Sarah felt to escape her miserable life outside school, her irresponsible mother, her criminal father, the poverty. No one knew how badly Sarah wanted a better life for herself.

Now, she's not only popular — "Kids I don't even know know me," she says proudly — but she's tied for first in her class and is in a heated race for valedictorian.
All she has to do now is stay the course. All she has to do now is not screw up.

At her grandfather's house, the party wends on. Sarah reminds her brother: "Just make sure everyone's out by 10 (a.m)."

That's when her grandfather will be back from watching her 9-year-old brother Jordan play football in Warsaw, Mo., where he's been sent to live with their aunt, Denise.

Occasionally Sarah's grandfather leaves her alone for the weekend. When he does, she and her brother push their luck by throwing one of these get-togethers for their close friends. Inevitably, a few kids end up sleeping sprawled out on the couch or floor so they don't drive home drunk.

Early the next morning Sarah, Brian and their sundry friends — some hungover, some still slightly drunk — make a mad dash to dump cigarette butts and beer bottles before

grandpa comes home. They turn on fans. They spray Lysol to mask the odor of stale booze and vomit.

By nature, Charles Lombrano, 74, is quiet and solitary. A retired grain inspector who likes to fish, he took in Sarah and her brothers to keep them from being sent to foster homes. He thought he'd be taking care of them a couple of weeks. He loves them, but he never banked on having them a year and a half.

Sarah can tell his nerves are shot. Time and again he's threatened to boot them out of his house. The strain of trying to corral two teen-agers has been too difficult. When he complains, they ignore him. Their rooms are littered with clothes. They stay out late.

At 10 a.m. Sarah's grandfather arrives to a home reeking of cigarettes and Lysol.

Sarah's gone to work at Subway and won't be home till late. But the last partyers are still there, lounging in Lombrano's living room.

Next morning Lombrano raps on Sarah's bedroom door.

"OK. OK. I'm up," Sarah says.

Her grandfather opens her door.

"By the way, sweetheart," he says sharply, "I want your ass out of here."

Three months later, just before Christmas 1999.

Sarah stands arguing in the school library.

"I'm sorry," says the cheerleading coach, Kerry Kubicki, the former Miss Norbury. "But, no."

"No? What do you mean, `No'?" Sarah asks.

"Just that," Kubicki says flatly. "No. You're not quitting cheerleading. That's all there is to it. No."

Sarah's so frustrated she can hardly respond. Does Kubicki think she made this decision lightly?

For four years Sarah has cheered at nearly every football game. Every volleyball game. Every basketball game. Nights. Days. Weekends. Even though people laughed at her, she was there.

But ever since her grandfather tossed her out and shipped Brian to live with Jordan in Warsaw, the pace is draining her.

She's on her own.

Every day she's in school. Nights and weekends she works at Subway. In between she goes home to a dimly lit, low-income apartment in Shawnee, 10 miles from Schlagle. Her two teen-age roommates, former high school friends who became common law man and wife, spend nearly every night getting stoned.

If that was all Sarah was facing, maybe she would keep cheering. After all, she lived for a year without heat, water and light, and no one even knew it. But it's not just that.

"I'm failing math," she tells Kubicki.

And Sarah has never, *never* failed anything or even gotten lower than a B.

She wants Kubicki to understand. More than being Sarah's coach, Kubicki is the only adult Sarah has ever confided in.

Kubicki won't give in. She believes Sarah *needs* cheerleading.

In the last few months, she's watched a young fearless girl become ... what? Not defeated, because Sarah would never allow that, but fatigued, Kubicki says. Tired. There are times when Sarah, who could jump as high as the best girls at Schlagle, walks with a weary shuffle. For months there has been something too serious, too somber in her face.

So, again, Kubicki says no.

"Sarah, this is your senior year," she says gently. "And you will never repeat this time again. When you look back, I want you to look back and be proud of something you finished and at a time when you were happy."

She offers Sarah a deal. Cheerleading is expensive: uniforms, fees, shoes.

Sarah still owes more than $300.

"Quit," Kubicki tells Sarah, "and you still have to pay me. Cheer some, just two days a week, and you owe me nothing."

In Sarah's life no adult has ever been so generous.

"OK," Sarah says.

Saturday, Feb. 5, 2000.

Sometimes Sarah feels so alone, she forgets how her classmates see her.

Tonight she will find out.

It is 9:30 p.m., the evening of the Schlagle High School Winter Formal 2000. The main ballroom of the Jack Reardon Civic Center is boiling over with partying teen-agers.

Close to a third of the student body, 300 kids, dance under flickering lights and red, white and blue balloons. Like mini rap music executives, boys sport urban-cool suits, derbies on their heads and spats on their feet. In their hands, they grasp metal-tipped canes.

The girls – hair piled high, necklines cut low – weave through the crowd in body-hugging dresses or billowy confections in crayon colors.

But tonight's more than a dance. It's also the night students will find out who, among three senior girls, will be crowned Queen of the Winter Dance. The crowning is purely a popularity contest. Earlier in the week seniors voted. When the votes were counted, three girls stood out:

Kia White. Camille Graves. And Sarah Clark.

"I heard someone might've put my name on the ballot," Sarah said earlier in the week, shrugging, as if neither winning nor losing mattered much to her.

None of her closest friends would be at the dance. Some had to work, others just didn't want to bother. Really, it's no big deal. She isn't even bringing a date. She's going, you know, just to see.

The night of the dance, she takes two hours to get ready.

She piles her hair regally atop her head. She wears a new dress, midnight blue and lace, and drapes a black shawl across her shoulders. The look is Spanish, like a lady out of a Goya painting.

When Sarah leaves her apartment, no one is there to say goodbye or good luck, to offer her a hug or take her picture. She drives to the dance alone.

Inside, beneath the pounding rhythm of rap, hip-hop and techno music, she mingles and chats amiably. She dances in groups beneath the lights.

Minutes before the crowning, Sarah, Kia, Camille and their ceremonial escorts gather outside the ballroom. Students and teachers clear the dance floor. They crowd the perimeter, clapping, whistling, cheering as each pair files in.

Miss Kia White escorted by Mr. Joel Webb.

"Yo, Kia!" "Do it, girl!"

Miss Sarah Clark escorted by Mr. Jontell Jones.

"Hey, Saraahh!"

Miss Camille Graves escorted by Mr. Adrian Washington.

The cheers grow louder.

"Whoooo, Camille!"

"That's my daughter!" Camille's mother shouts from the back of the room.

At the center of the dance floor, the three girls stand, their faces lit with beauty-pageant smiles when, straightaway, the emcee announces the vote.

The second princess is ...

Their smiles freeze.

... Kia White.

The students clap, whistle. Kia's smile barely has a chance to wither when the emcee begins again: *And the first princess is ...*

Now it's between Sarah and Camille. When the first princess is announced, everyone will know the winner.

... Sarah Clark.

The cheers and whistles crescendo. Camille Graves, statuesque in a tight leopard dress, is the Winter Formal Queen 2000.

Students and teachers flood the dance floor to congratulate the girls. It is then, for a mere moment, that Sarah finds herself standing alone in the middle of the dance floor.

No close friends are there. No family. Before the moment lingers, Sarah moves off to congratulate the other girls.

For the rest of the night, she dances and smiles. She talks. She poses for photos.

The next morning she calls a friend, Rachel Vernon, a freshman at Ottawa University in Kansas. Immediately Rachel scolds her for not saying she had been nominated to the Royal Court.

"Sarah," she says, "you should have said something."

Six weeks later. Late March 2000.

Sarah feels burned out. On school. On work. On her friends. She's tired of all the struggling, all the garbage. And she knows time is running out.

Graduation is two months away, and she still hasn't applied to college. She never applied for scholarships. She never even took the ACT again. And now, before bed every night, she's getting high to help herself sleep.

With the end so close, she wonders: Is she sabotaging herself? Afraid of the future? Is it failure she fears or maybe success? She doesn't know.

"I just feel so much pressure," Sarah says wearily, sitting in a restaurant booth on a miserable, rainy night. With her eyes downcast, she picks at her food. Her speech is slow, her shoulders slumped.

"I feel like I'm being pulled in a million directions."

A few weeks back, coach Kubicki told her: Sarah, get out and go away to a four-year college. Get away from here, and start a new life away from everything that's weighed you down.

Kubicki even offered to help fill out applications if Sarah would bring them in.

Sarah never did. After she got a D-minus in the third quarter of pre-calculus, Sarah's energy drained away. She lost her confidence.

When she turns 18 in July, the $619 a month she's been receiving from Social Security — now sent to her in care of her grandfather — will dry up. She also has about $15,000 in a bank certificate of deposit, a gift from her late grandmother.

But she doesn't know what to think about college. It's all jumbled in her head. She has $15,000. But that won't be enough, so she'll have to work. If she has to work, she won't cut it academically. If she doesn't work, she'll be poor again. She doesn't want that.

And what does she know about college anyway? Relatively few kids from Schlagle even go away to four-year schools, only 30 percent. A bunch drop out. She may be on her own now, but in college she'd really be on her own.

"If I go away to college, I'm going to fail," she says. "I know myself. I'm too much of a party person. But if I stay, if I let myself slide, it's like everything will have been for nothing."

Sarah falls into silence.

Graduation Night. May 22, 2000. 9:25 p.m.

On the grass outside Memorial Hall, the concrete, neoclassical auditorium in Kansas City, Kan., Sarah stands in her royal blue graduation robe. She clasps her Schlagle diploma. Closing her eyes, she hugs her mother and, for a long while, seems reluctant to let go.

"I'm proud of you," her mother says. "You did good."

Sarah knew she would be emotional tonight. So much has changed since the beginning of the year, when she envisioned being named valedictorian and leaving Schlagle

loaded with scholarships.

Earlier in the evening, when the vice principal announced Schlagle's scholarship winners, Sarah sat and watched with regret while one after another, on and on, classmates with grades inferior to her own stood to enthusiastic applause.

She never did get around to applying.

Still, Sarah feels good tonight.

Most everyone she's ever loved is here. Her mother. Her grandfather. Her brothers. A couple of friends. She even invited Randy, her stepdad, who's been out of jail for close to two years.

"He's the only dad I've ever known," she says.

She feels like she's back on track for the first time in months. In April she moved in with a cheerleader friend and her father. Living with married teens and getting high too often had been bad moves. But those mistakes didn't keep her from coming close to her dream.

Although she didn't make valedictorian, she was third in her class of 217.

As she stood in her cap and gown, her family and classmates applauded her.

Then they applauded again as Sarah stood to be recognized as one of 15 students named to the National Honor Society for three consecutive years.

And although no one announced it this night, of all the girls on Sarah's freshman cheerleading squad, only two made cheerleader all four years. One was Marie Hinson. The other was Sarah.

"I did all right," she said. "I'm proud of myself."

During the national anthem, her eyes welled with tears. And they welled again during "Pomp and Circumstance."

But nothing affected her as much as Cicely Bledsoe's speech. When Cicely, a senior, spoke, the words came so close to Sarah's life, she nearly wept.

"Class of 2000, I challenge you to continue your education. And when you are faced with those negative stereotypes that society has tagged on you, or when you are surrounded by those people who are saying you shouldn't, you wouldn't and you couldn't, lift your head to the sky, and fiercefully, unfearfully and forcefully say without a shadow of a doubt, `Yes, I am somebody.'

" `Yes, I will exceed the limits.'

" `And, no, there is nothing you can do to stop me.' "

Sarah wants those words to be true. But she knows from her own life how hard it can be.

With high school behind her, she knows what she needs to do. College.

"It isn't even in my mind not to go," Sarah says.

This summer she'll keep working at Subway on Shawnee Mission Parkway. And she figures she'll take the ACT again. In the fall maybe she'll enroll at Johnson County Community College. If it's not too late, she might still try to get into Ottawa University, where her friend Rachel Vernon goes to school.

She'll find a way.

"I got this far," Sarah says. "I'll be OK."

Outside Memorial Hall, Sarah spends the next half-hour weaving among classmates saying goodbye. At almost 11 p.m., Sarah is one of the last graduates to leave. She walks alone back to her car.

It's time to move on.

-30-

SARAH'S FAITH

After troubles and tribulations, college student Sarah finds spiritual solace

By ERIC ADLER - The Kansas City Star
Date: 07/07/01

On a dark night in early October, Sarah Clark, 18, sits in the blackness of her car parked in front of Ottawa University. She is alone. The radio plays. Dashboard lights shed a dim glow over her face.

Watchful, she takes out a joint and looks around to see if there's anyone walking outside who might spot her getting high, tattle and destroy the chance she has been handed to go to college here.

She's about to light up, but her mind is unsettled. Sarah is a freshman, a former Schlagle High School cheerleader from Kansas City, Kan. Last June, after a series in The Kansas City Star chronicled her uphill path through high school, her life altered dramatically.

In a three-day series, "Sarah's Hope," people read how Sarah faced tremendous obstacles -- a father and stepfather in prison, a mother often absent, a family beset by poverty, neglect, violence and drugs. For a year, Sarah and her two younger brothers lived alone in a near-empty house without lights, heat or water. Despite everything, she managed for four years to root for her classmates as a cheerleader and graduate third in her class.

When people also read how at the end of her high-school

career she tried and failed even to apply to college, they responded by sending her to college themselves.

In a matter of days, close to $12,000 poured into a college trust fund. Ottawa University, an American Baptist college of about 430 students less than an hour south of Kansas City, offered her an $80,000 package of financial aid, scholarships and donations to cover every cent of a four-year education.

Sarah knows it's the chance of a lifetime. She doesn't want to blow it.

Yet, ever since she began school a month ago, she has been doing this night after night, getting high by herself in the parking lot or off campus, filling her car and lungs with the sweet smoke that in troubled times has always seemed to bring her peace and escape.

Except tonight something is different. She can feel it. She doesn't want to be in this car, in the dark, by herself. And her thoughts keep flashing back to the faces of the kids she has been meeting with Rachel since school began one month ago.

When Sarah first got to school, Rachel Vernon -- Sarah's best friend from Schlagle and an Ottawa sophomore -- told Sarah she was more than welcome to hang out with her. But if she was going to hang out with her, she first wanted Sarah to accompany her to the clubs she was involved with.

"Give it one week," Rachel had said. If Sarah didn't like it, that was OK. No pressure. They would always be friends. So with Rachel, Sarah went to one campus Christian group after another. She went to Christian Faith in Action (CFA), where she heard student after student talk about what God had done for them in their lives, how "awesome" he was.

She went to a meeting of GOTCHA (Get Off the Couch and Help Another), a Christian community-service club that helps the poor and elderly. Together she and Rachel even went to church, where Sarah prayed and sang the hymns.

All around her, she just kept meeting students who seemed, well, there is no other word for it, happy.

In her car, she puts down the joint. With her eyes closed, she begins, "Dear God..."

* * * *

Flash forward seven months. It is May, days from the end of Sarah's freshman year.

Sarah, a delicate silver crucifix around her neck, sits in baggy jeans and a T-shirt on her dormitory bed holding a Bible kept in a jazzy leopard case.

The marijuana and shot glass posters she had at the beginning of school year are gone. At various points around the room there hang a cross, a message board that says "I Love Jesus," posters of the Christian rock group Pillar and a sign declaring "Christians Aren't Perfect, Just Forgiven." Quietly, contemplatively, Sarah talks, recounting exactly what happened on that night seven months ago.

"So I just started praying," she says. "I started praying and, you know, asked him to take away the desire I had (to get high) and asked to know him."

She pauses. A faint smile crosses her lips.

"I was filled with the Holy Spirit," she says, then struggles to impart exactly how that felt. Something like a warm bright light, she says, like a burst of fresh, clean air filling her entire body.

"That," she says, "was the first time I had experienced God. And it was like being on a high, better than any high I had ever been on. I knew at that moment he was real. I knew at the moment that he existed."

And so it happened.

Should anyone ask what's been going on with Sarah Clark ever since she started school. There's the answer: She found God.

"It just changed my life," she says.

Sarah likes to say that her transformation happened in one night, "real drastic." However, anyone who knows Sarah's story, who knows how she always seemed to struggle for something commendable – becoming a cheerleader, becoming valedictorian – even in the midst of despair, could argue that all her life she has been looking for a finer path.

Either way, from that night on, Sarah's life has not been the same. After leaving her car that evening, she walked back to her dorm room, crawled into bed and, until she fell asleep, prayed.

When she woke, uplifted, she got hold of a Bible and began reading it feverishly. She joined GOTCHA and CFA and began attending church three times a week.

"I really started getting into the Scripture," she says. "And I would come across all these Scriptures that said what you do for other people, you're doing it for Jesus. And you know, it's, like, it's really true. And I, like, really got into that."

Whereas back in high school Sarah had done some community service as an obligation for the National Honor Society, now with GOTCHA she began doing it because she wanted to. She visited the elderly in nursing homes, made baskets for the needy at Thanksgiving, delivered for Meals on Wheels.

"Something really changed in me," she says. "My heart changed. I wanted to help people. I wanted to give back." Give back, she says, because she is now convinced that everything that has happened in her life – not just the bad, but the newspaper story that emerged and how wonderfully people responded – have all been part of God's plan to bring her to Ottawa and to God.

She thinks, for example, of the hundreds of supportive letters she received from people after her story ran.

"You know, the people, like, gave money for me to be here," she says. "A lot of the letters I got were like, `We're praying for you, and God bless.' " At the time, I was like, `Whatever.' I never believed in God. I never had any faith. But it hit me that, you know, it is God. I need to give back."

From the moment of her epiphany, she made it her path. Which is not to say it has been easy. Or that, as Sarah says, she hasn't "stumbled."

* * * *

Winter break rolled around three months after her transformation. It was time to leave school.

Back in Kansas City, Kan., Sarah – the former partying leader of the pack – presented her new self to her old friends.

"I was trying to be this good witness and witness to them, to bring them to God," she says. "They would look at me like I was crazy. I was back home with my same old friends, and they were doing the same old things. I told them I had stopped all that. They were like, `Yeah, like that's going to last.' "

It didn't. At a small party she got high again.

"The old cravings started coming back, and I wasn't around my support group anymore," she says.

Still, something had indeed changed. In her heart, she felt terrible.

"I was high, but I was, like, `This is wrong,' " she says.

When the party ended, she stayed awake with some friends and her brother. For five hours she told them about what had happened in her life, the emptiness she had felt before, the contentment she had come to feel.

They listened. Loving her, they came to understand how important Sarah's newfound faith was to their friend and sister.

"They even went to church with me," she says.

When she returned to school, it was with a renewed spiritual commitment.

In her classes, she did average, B's and C's, nothing stellar. In high school she had always excelled with little effort. Now in college, for the first time, she was being forced to study.

And whereas in high school she had long thought about becoming a lawyer, thinking the potential for money and social status would bring her happiness, at Ottawa she changed her mind and major from political science to English and human services.

Her main college friends, aside from Rachel, are her Christian friends from CFA and GOTCHA. No longer cheerleading, she has now taken an interest in acting. Through one Christian-centered play she even hoped to witness to her own mother, who has a long history of smoking marijuana and going to the gambling boats and with whom Sarah has had a rocky relationship. Still, Sarah's mom agreed to come to the show.

Sarah didn't have a large role. But in the one-act play, the main character, a college girl, sits in her room praying. The character of Jesus stands behind her.

When friends at a wild party cajole her to join them, the girl exits her room. Before she does, she leaves Jesus behind, nailing him, as in the crucifixion, to her wall.

The stage darkens. When the lights come up, everyone nods in a drunken sleep. Penitent, the girl returns home grateful that Jesus has not abandoned her. Taken from the wall, he embraces her.

Sarah had a role as a partyer. When the play ended, Sarah, jubilant, went with her mom for a late-night bite at the local Country Kitchen. There, her mom talked to her in no uncertain terms.

Sarah says, "She was like, `Sarah, I think it's fine or whatever for you to have this religion, but I don't want it forced on me.' She told me that she doesn't even want me to talk to her about it.

"I want her to know God. But I don't know. She is pretty much into her life."

Sarah says it is too difficult for her to live with her mom. So this summer, when she is home, she is living with her grandfather. But even that won't be long-term.

Whereas last summer Sarah worked at Subway making sandwiches and getting high and drunk with friends at night, this summer she is working as a camp counselor at Christian camps in both Illinois and Kansas, including a two-week camp at Ottawa University.

She hopes her own story will inspire others.

"I think I have a really powerful testimony," she says. "If I can do a 360, then anyone can.

"I feel whole, you know? It was always like something was missing. Whatever was missing I tried to fill with drugs and alcohol or whatever. And I don't need that anymore. It's like my eyes have kind of been opened."

Oh, and there's one more thing Sarah wants to say. It's a message to all the people who wrote her and supported her and prayed for her and whom she never took the time to write in return.

"Pretty much, I just want to say thank you," she says. "Tell people, you know, how much my life has changed and how much I appreciate their help and support and their prayers. I know a lot of people prayed for me. I think it is really important.

"I think it really helped a lot."