



One step at a time

Sophomore April Lohrman takes small but determined steps on her journey to independence

Story by Scott Henson, Staff Reporter

Lindsey Borgna/Index

Sophomore April Lohrman walks back to her residence hall after class during Monday afternoon. Lohrman was able to walk with only one cane during her freshman year, but after she was struck by a car, she had to rely on a second cane to help support her while she walks.

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-Walter Lohrman
April's father

Sophomore April Lohrman spent a year learning to maintain balance while opening a door. Now that she can do it on her own, she said, it often frustrates her when strangers perform acts like this for her. I've worked too hard and too long for people to be opening all the doors for me," she said.

Since birth, April has had spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy that causes a constant state of contraction in her leg muscles. April's condition has forced her to undergo 11 surgeries and to use a series of wheelchairs, walkers, canes and bikes to get her from place to place throughout her life. But despite her physical disabilities, April is maintaining her independence and improving her mobility day by day through a lifetime of surgeries, exercise and will power.

April's first six surgeries involved correcting a cleft palate and strabismus, a condition common to those with cerebral palsy in which the eyes don't align properly. Following these, she's had orthopedic surgeries to correct cerebral palsy-related complications at ages 12, 14, 15 and 17, each of which required physical therapy sessions an hour and a half away from her home, several times a week.

"I would go to school, then I would come home and I'd go to the hospital to do therapy for two hours, and then I'd do it all over again the next day," she said. "I really didn't have time

to get involved in school and get to know other people."

Classmates began taking more notice of April when a Spanish teacher asked her to share her story with all her classes one day. After that, she said she became very well known at her school.

Liz Robertson, a Lindenwood University sophomore, was an attendee during one of April's speeches during her junior year. Robertson said that when she heard about April's multiple surgeries and her demanding recovery periods, she was awed by April's consistent optimism.

"Everyone has their bad days, and everyone gets down, and not to say that she doesn't either, but she always has a positive outlook and doesn't let anyone stop her," she said. "That's what's impressed me most — that she doesn't take 'no' for an answer."

April underwent surgery her senior year of high school, which, coupled with intensive physical therapy and exercise, allowed her to walk, unsupported by a cane, across her high school graduation stage. She received a standing ovation from everyone in attendance, including her father Walter Lohrman, who said the event was an emotional reminder of how far she had come.

"I was basically crying," Walter said. "When her graduation class stood up and cheered her when she got that diploma, you realized that all her fellow students knew what she went through to get that and do that. You get a lot of pride when you



see stuff like that happen."

After coming to Truman last year, April was able to walk with a single cane around campus until last semester when she was struck by a vehicle while crossing South Davis Street on her bicycle. The accident resulted in a broken right leg and hip, a compression fracture in her back and cuts to the side of her face.

Since the accident, April said her right leg has lost some of its ability to support her, and she's had to rely on a second cane. She said this has been a setback in her progress toward total self-sufficiency, because it means she currently has no free

hands to use while walking.

Returning to her use of a single cane, which she said is her goal for the end of this year, will require frequent leg exercise at the Student Recreation Center, a building to which April is no stranger. She said that since the beginning of this year, she has gone to the rec center at least four times a week, exercising each time for three to four hours — an increase from last year, when she would go to the rec center for at least two hours, four times a week.

She said doctors have told her that for those with her form of cerebral palsy, achievements in muscle strength and control

can be lost without regular physical activity. April said a friend's experience with cerebral palsy made her realize just how important exercise should be in her life.

"I remember meeting her when she was 15, and she could walk all the time with two canes, and she stopped having therapy and stopped exercising and ... now she's in a power chair 24/7," she said. "That is not going to happen to me. I went through too much to have that happen to me."

Walter said he and his wife tried to instill this drive in their daughter with "tough love" during her upbringing.

"Whenever April wanted to give up, my wife was there to say, 'April, it can be done, but you have to realize that you've got to do it,'" he said. "You have to be a little more stern, but when you start seeing the results of it, nothing is more pleasurable than that."

Walter has heard doubts from medical professionals concerning April's journey toward independence since he and his wife adopted her at four months-old. He said that because of April's determination to move forward, he's since seen those doctors eat their words.

"The doctors said she would be nothing but a 2 or 3 year old wheelchair child, mentally and physically," he said. " ... Nothing [makes me] more proud in the world than being able to sit there and see what doctors have said your child can be and see that they're totally, completely wrong."