

Name: Emma Kelly

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High School you attend: Holy Innocents' Episcopal School

Graduation year: 2027

Sport: Cross Country

What her nominator said:

Emma was diagnosed with a spinal cord tumor in 2020 as a 6th grader, which required her to undergo two surgical resections and chemotherapy. As a result, she has residual right leg weakness from her resections and the resultant nerve damage. After the two surgeries, Emma had to re-learn how to walk, and was unsure if she would ever be able to do more athletic options than walk. However, her determination and resilience led her to be able to not only return to walking, but running--and running quickly, at that! Even after a third follow-up spinal surgery in March 2023 (approximately 4 months prior to the start of cross-country season), Emma has jumped in to running and training with the team with 100% effort. It is impressive enough for her to make our top 12 (qualifying for the State meet) as a freshman, but it is all the more impressive when you take into account that a mere 3 years ago, she didn't know if she would be able to walk again, let alone run. Emma is a humble athlete, not bragging on herself or fighting for the limelight. She is incredibly supportive of her teammates, and her positive attitude is contagious. She is focused on bringing her best each and every day, and even as a freshman, is already a role model in terms of her attitude and commitment.

Inspiration Award Essay
Emma Kelly
November 14, 2023

On March 23, 2020, within the halls of Childrens' Healthcare of Atlanta, I exclaimed to my mom, "Look, mom, I'm walking!" I had a physical therapist carefully perched behind me and a brace on my right leg. I was 11 years old, and 18 days earlier I had undergone my first spinal cord tumor resection. When I first showed up to the hospital, I had terrible back pain. I wanted to have this surgery because I had hoped it would help me feel better.

But, when I woke up from that surgery, my right leg felt weird. It was tingly and it felt like it was floating off the bed, even though my mom assured me it was resting on the bed with my left leg. My tumor was within my spinal cord, which controls all the sensory and motor functions of our bodies. When the surgeon attempted to remove the tumor, there was some damage to my spinal cord — which was a risk we had no choice but to take. While I had hoped my back pain would disappear, I did not realize that I would have to relearn how to walk and run after the procedure.

After about three weeks in the hospital, I went home with a walker, a leg brace and a wheelchair for longer distances. I continued physical therapy, including a specialized therapy called robotics that used electrical signals to help encourage my muscles to work again. In time, I was able to walk and get around, though I continued to have weakness in my right leg. Later that year, I had to have a second tumor resection surgery. And, in July, I had to begin chemotherapy because what was left of the tumor was growing.

While my physical therapy appointments and chemotherapy infusions continued, I started training with a triathlon team in March of 2021. My right leg weakness continued to affect my running gait, and I had to put cages on my bike pedals because my foot would not stay on the pedal otherwise. I competed in a few local triathlons and even traveled to Ohio that summer to compete in the Junior Nationals race. Training and racing was a challenge due to my right leg weakness, but also because chemotherapy left me undernourished and incredibly weak.

In September of 2021, I completed my final chemotherapy treatment. I was in the middle of my first cross country season at my middle school. As my body recovered, I could feel myself getting stronger, and I ended the season as the fastest girl on my team. However, my next challenge was quickly approaching. During my initial surgeries, pieces of my back bones were removed and this caused my back to hunch over, a condition called kyphosis. Initially, we managed this with more physical therapy, but eventually I had to wear a brace for 22 hours per day to prevent further damage. During my second cross country season in eighth grade, I removed my brace for practice and races, but had to quickly put it back on afterward.

The brace helped for a period of time, but the curving of my back continued to get worse and I began to have more pain. In March of 2023, I had a spinal fusion. Unfortunately, I had some complications from my surgery and I had to be in the hospital for nearly three weeks. Following this surgery, I had a different brace that was much more cumbersome and uncomfortable. I was not allowed to run — or, really do anything for three months. This summer, though, I slowly got back into running. After some shorter summer runs, I was able to start my freshman cross country season at Holy Innocents'. I focused on building my running up again this season, and I was proud to receive a varsity letter my freshman year as one of our team's

top 12 runners. I was honored to represent my team at the state championship this year and proud that I accomplished a personal best race time that day.

Chemotherapy and surgeries are hopefully fully behind me, but my right leg weakness persists and is something I will have to manage for my whole life. There are little frustrations, like not being able to wear the shoes I want to wear to homecoming. But, there are also bigger challenges I continue to face, like learning how to drive. We've lost count of the number of nights in the hospital, chemotherapy infusions, MRIs and physical therapy appointments. My journey was not meant to be inspirational, but I never wanted to give up on the goals I had before I was diagnosed. Not showing up for triathlon training and cross country practice was never an option. Sports have given me an opportunity to set and achieve goals, meet friends who support me, and work with adults who respect my limits and challenge me appropriately. Most importantly, sports have helped me heal emotionally and physically the past few years.