

# Howell high school grad: I can overcome anything

# 18-year old relearns breathing, walking, talking after infection

By **JARED KALTWASSER**  
STAFF WRITER

**NEW BRUNSWICK** — Taped to the door of Emily Kokotos' hospital room door at PSE&G Children's Specialized Hospital was a list of accomplishments, each beginning with the words, "I can."

The list documents the 18-year-old Howell resident's harrowing journey from a paralyzing viral infection, to her first steps with the help of a walker, to her release from the hospital Friday.

The journey began back in April — on Easter Sunday. Emily complained of a sore throat and took a nap. That night, her parents couldn't wake her up.

"We called 911, and we rushed her to the hospital, and they diagnosed her with mono (mononucleosis)," said Theresa Kokotos, Emily's mother. "And from the mono, she was diagnosed with the Epstein-Barr virus, and the Epstein-Barr virus caused viral encephalitis, which is the swelling of the brain, and she was finally diagnosed with ADEM (acute disseminated encephalomyelitis), which is lesions all over her brain and her spine."

Emily was in a coma for about four days. When she woke up, she had lost the ability walk, eat, and even breathe on her own.

"I felt like I was scream-

ing at the top of my lungs and they're just like 'Emily, we can't understand you right now,'" Emily recalled. "... I was waking up and I was like 'Why can't I talk? Why can't I move?'"

Dr. Michele Fantasia, director of the spinal chord injury program and general rehabilitation at PSE&G Children's Specialized Hospital, said ADEM is not caused by a virus itself but, rather, by a rare — possibly genetic — reaction to a virus.

"The body interprets it, and instead of fighting the virus, it begins attacking the person's own brain and spinal chord," she said.

Fantasia said the body's immune system specifically attacks the coating of nerve cells, called myelin, which in turn causes the cells to lose the ability to transmit impulses, causing paralysis.

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Emily spent six weeks in the pediatric intensive care unit at Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital in New Brunswick undergoing six treatments of plasma pheresis to cleanse the antibodies that had turned against her body. On May 26, she moved next door to PSE&G Children's Specialized Hospital — still being fed and breathing through tubes — to begin intensive therapy.

"They told us right from

the start it was going to be a long road," Theresa Kokotos said. "I said, 'I don't care how long the road was, as long as we can fix it.'"

Emily progressed quickly, re-learning to speak, eat and take steps while going through speech, physical, occupational and psychological therapy.

Her occupational therapist, Tina Gawri, said the senior in high school was motivated and inspired to get better.

"It was a challenge with her because she progressed

so nicely each day that every day I had to think on my feet and make it a little bit harder," Gawri said.

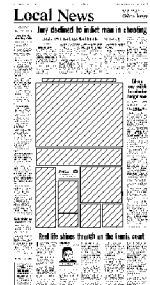
One of Emily's chief motivations was attending her high school graduation at Freehold Township High School on June 23.

"They didn't think I was going to it at first but when I started getting better and better, they were like, 'Well, there's a chance you might be able to go to graduation, but if there's not, don't get upset over it,'" Emily said.

She missed her senior prom and the last quarter of her senior year. She had

to take one required English course at the hospital in order to graduate.

When graduation day finally came, Emily was among the 525 students receiving diplomas. She



came in a wheelchair, but she stood to receive her diploma. And when she rose to her feet, the crowd joined her, giving a standing ovation.

"When they stood up I was like, 'Oh, my gosh.' I wasn't expecting it," she said.

On Friday, Emily was discharged from the hospital. She will continue with physical and occupational

therapy three times a week at Children's Specialized Outpatient Center at Hamilton.

In January, she plans to go on to college at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Pomona to study forensic science and criminology. She plans to become a state trooper, just like her aunt.

"Knowing what I went

through, I can overcome anything," Emily said. "Some people are saying, 'Do you think you'll be able to handle being a state trooper?' And I'm like 'Do you know what I just went through? I think I can handle it.'"

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STAFF PHOTOS: JASON TOWLEN

**Eighteen-year-old Emily Kokotos works with occupational therapist Tina Gawri, Thursday at the PSE&G Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick.**



**Kokotos is interviewed in her hospital room, Thursday. She was released Friday after recovering from a paralyzing viral infection.**