

Disability is not Disabling

January 2006 Upper School Assembly
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It all started innocently enough. Katie Samson was home from Middlebury College on winter break and decided to go sledding with some friends. A freak accident resulted in her landing on her head, breaking her neck, and becoming paralyzed from the chest down. In the blink of an eye Katie went from being a championship lacrosse player to a wheelchair-dependent quadriplegic.

Katie Samson, sister of Dave Samson (Upper School counselor, form head, English teacher, coach) spoke about her life altering events to a spellbound Upper School audience. To say that she was inspirational is to minimize the impact of her talk. Katie described her process of recovery and healing which included three months in *Magee Rehabilitation Hospital* learning to become independent again. Initially, Katie was unable to raise her arms, feed herself, transfer from a bed to a wheelchair and back, take care of her daily hygiene routine, and perform other activities that the able bodied person takes for granted.

Amazingly, Katie returned to college---with her mother in tow. While having her mother as a roommate was not Katie's original plan, this arrangement allowed her the safety, support, and independence to continue. Katie fondly described her "invisible mother" who drove her to parties but agreed not to 'notice' anything. Katie gradually turned more to friends and school personnel to help her. It was through these experiences that true friends emerged and less reliable friends showed their true colors. In one instance, Katie went to a party with someone she considered a good friend only to be left without a way to get down the flight of stairs when the 'friend' got drunk and left the party without her.

Despite these unwanted challenges, Katie graduated only one semester later than originally planned. At Middlebury, February graduates ski down the Middlebury Snow Bowl in cap and gown to receive their diplomas, and Katie Samson (with specially formatted ski apparatus) skied with her peers! This was just one of many examples of her optimism, drive, inner strength, and fortitude.

Today, Katie is in graduate school at the University of Arizona, studying art history/history of photography and is planning to apply for doctoral programs once she completes her master's degree. In addition to her academic pursuits, Katie is back to being the competitive athlete she was before her accident. She is one of the few women in the country playing quad-rugby, an extreme sport noted for its aggressive athleticism.

Despite paralysis, limited finger mobility, and many concomitant health issues, Katie participates in life more actively and fully than most of us. Rather than wait for life to happen to her, she seizes the moment. She has truly made lemonade from lemons. While she says that she was initially focused on the hope of walking again, now she rarely thinks about that because she is too busy living and enjoying her life. One rehab counselor told her that each year of recovery is equivalent to 4 years of development, and now that she is 6 years post accident she agrees that in this new life she is in her 20s and ready to

date. In fact, Katie has a boyfriend (able bodied) whom she met in class, who sees her as a person, not just as a disabled person. This comes as no surprise to those of us who felt her magnetism, optimism, energy, and zest for experience. It feels good to be around her.

Even before Katie's brother Dave Samson began working at GA, our teams participated in the Katie Samson Lacrosse Festival, a yearly event to raise money for spinal cord research. The festival has evolved into an exciting day of sports, fun, and fund raising, focusing on quality of life issues for those with a variety of disabilities. This year's festival will be held on April 29th, so mark your calendars!