

## Emily Shanahan: Independent Queen

**E**mily Shanahan is living proof that you can navigate high school using a wheelchair and find independence and friends apart from family — just like any other teenager. A 15-year-old who lives in West Carrollton, Ohio, Emily started high school in 2003 and immediately joined several groups, including Writer's Ink, a writer's club. The club is currently penning a play about a fairy tale with a twist, and her costume will incorporate her wheelchair.



**“I do the unexpected thing: I smile and say ‘hi.’”**

Acting and modeling come naturally to Emily, who has done both since she was a young girl, even appearing in a gospel musical movie.

Diagnosed at 18 months with cerebral palsy, Emily got her first wheelchair at 5. She uses a power wheelchair and DragonDictate, voice-activated computer software. Emily's many years in public

school taught her the best way to approach nondisabled peers.

“People are curious about me,” she says. “They’re not sure how to react. They’re not sure if I’ve got brain damage or only physical problems. A couple of times I’ve come into a classroom and everyone’s turned and looked at me, even the teacher. Then I do the unexpected thing: I smile and say ‘hi,’” she says with a laugh. Emily usually has to go up to people and start conversations, but once they get past their initial discomfort, they realize she is no different from them, except she uses a chair. Her outgoing personality has proven to be a benefit in high school.

“I have a license to be weird anyway, so I take advantage of that,” says Emily, referring to her passion for ancient history, especially Egypt and its “famous, independent queens.” “So many people came up against so many insurmountable odds and they persevered anyway,” she explains.

Outside of school, Emily is a big fan of therapeutic horseback riding and likes spending time with friends from the Fellowship of Christian Students. Last summer at camp, she braved an 800-foot zip line across a lake several times.

Last fall, her parents equipped her wheelchair with a speaker cell phone and she got to go shopping for a couple of hours with a girlfriend and no parents in sight. A teenager's dream come true!

Emily plans to attend college and earn a degree in family counseling and Biblical history, with hopes of becoming a family therapist. And she already has some advice: “There will be rough spots, but in a bad situation, a good thing can come out of it — you’ve just got to look for it.”

— *By Kathe A. Conti*