



## First Matthew Harty Mito Scholarship recipient focuses on helping kids

All through her school career, Erica Blanchette had to deal with teachers and classmates who didn't understand her mitochondrial disease.



"Sometimes it felt like teachers had a personal grudge against me because of my Mito," she said. "I felt like some teachers over my school career had given up on me."

Despite her struggles with Mito, Erica, 18, graduated from Peabody (MA) Veterans Memorial High School on time and with good grades! Erica, the first recipient of the Matthew Harty Mito Scholarship, is now a freshman at North Shore Community College in Danvers, MA, where she is studying early childhood education to become a preschool assistant teacher.

"I had teachers who were really good with me and some who didn't know how to deal with it," Erica said. "I feel especially the energy piece of Mito was difficult for them to understand. Some teachers got really frustrated with me – some days I'd do really well; other days, if I was tired and not feeling well, it was hard to do the work. They thought I was lazy or defiant."

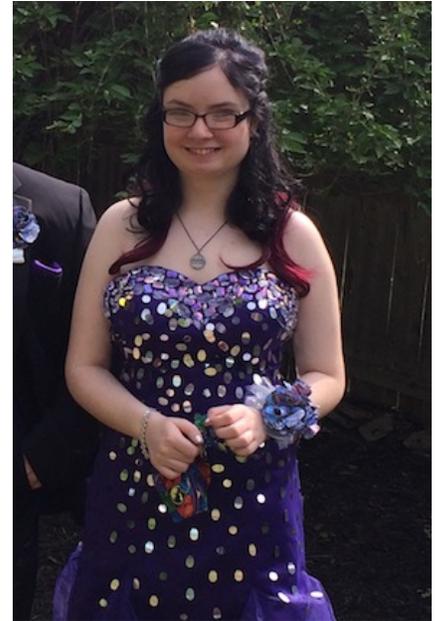
Mito is an invisible disease that is not well known or understood. That is probably the most difficult aspect for Erica to handle. People just don't "see" anything wrong with her and therefore make a lot of false assumptions.

Mitochondrial disease is an inherited chronic illness that can be present at birth or develop later in life. It causes debilitating physical, developmental, and cognitive disabilities with symptoms including poor growth; loss of muscle

coordination; muscle weakness and pain; seizures; vision and/or hearing loss; gastrointestinal issues; learning disabilities; and heart, liver, or kidney failure. About 1 in 4,000 people has Mito. It's progressive and there is no cure.

Erica's own teaching philosophy is patience, all-inclusivity, and working with every child. Erica has experience with young children, having worked at her high school's early childhood education program.

"There's so much you can teach them, but there's so much they can teach you," she said about her young charges. "They have a different perspective on the world."



Erica knows what it's like to have a different perspective. She was diagnosed with mitochondrial myopathy at age 10 and deals with low energy, low muscle tone, autonomic dysfunction, and a few other things.



Erica was in special education and adaptive classes for her entire school career.

"Teachers and students don't always understand how much hard work it is for me just to get through a typical school day, even with modifications," she said.

Because of her medical and school difficulties, Erica feels she will be a very compassionate teacher. "I have a passion for teaching others, and I can relate to struggling students. I will do everything I can to help them learn and make things easier for them if they are struggling."

Erica realizes her Mito will continue to be an obstacle, "but I am working to find ways to become as independent as possible." Her positive attitude and drive spring from the support and love she gets from her family and friends. She especially relies on the friends she has made at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp: "They know what I'm going through because they go through it, too."

This scholarship was established to honor the life of Matthew Harty, a bright, amazing boy who died of mitochondrial disease just days after his 8th birthday.

He loved his family more than anything; his smile lit up a room; and he touched the lives of everyone he met.

The daughter of Loree and Ralph Blanchette is honored to be the first Matthew Harty Mito Scholarship recipient. "I hope it inspires others with Mito," Erica said.

"This proves you can go to college and do other things that people never thought you could do," Erica said.

MitoAction is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for children, adults, and families living with mitochondrial disease through support, education, outreach, advocacy, and clinical research initiatives. Learn more at [www.mitoaction.org](http://www.mitoaction.org).

## **"One in Four Thousand" by Erica Blanchette**

I am one in four thousand  
But that's not all I am  
I am a sister, a daughter, a friend  
I am a classmate and a poet  
I am weird and I am dorky  
I am a senior, a hopeful future teacher  
I am unique and creative  
I am kind and empathetic  
I am an animal lover  
I am shy, but I am outgoing and talkative  
I am a writer who is inspired by everything  
I am hopeful  
I am loving  
I am one in four thousand people in the world living with Mito, but that is not all I am  
I am myself, I am ME!