Erica Blanchette defining her career path

Erica Blanchette was honored to be the first Matthew Harty Scholarship recipient. “I hope it inspires others with Mito,” she said at the time of the award in 2015. “This proves you can go to college and do other things that people never thought you could do.”

The daughter of Loree and Ralph Blanchette of Peabody, MA, has one year left on her early childhood degree from North Shore Community College in Danvers, MA.

Erica was diagnosed with mitochondrial myopathy at age 10 and deals with low energy, low muscle tone, autonomic dysfunction, and other issues. She entered college unsure if teaching was a realistic option for her.

For the last couple of semesters, Erica has been student teaching and it’s going well. Through this experience, she is defining her career path.

“We weren’t sure if it was realistic for me to handle student teaching,” she said, “but it shows that I may not be able to handle full-time [teaching], but it’s definitely possible for me to work part time.”

Erica hopes to become a part-time teacher’s assistant at a preschool. “I realized being a lead preschool teacher calls for physical requirements. I’m not sure that’s possible for me,” she said.

“I was upset about that at first.”

But her mom, who taught preschool, told her that if she’s a teaching assistant, she’ll still have fun with the kids but she won’t have to do the lesson planning.

“I like working with preschool kids because it’s never the same thing,” Erica said. “You never know what to expect from day to day.”

Because of her own medical difficulties, Erica feels she will be a very compassionate, understanding, sympathetic, and patient 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 has always had a kind heart and children were always drawn to her,” said her mom. “Often at doctor’s appointments, children of various ages would approach her and she would just interact with them automatically. She really seems to have found her calling and it is really exciting to see her confidence grow.”

Erica used some of her scholarship money to get an iPad for classes. “It definitely
made life easier in college," she said. “Taking notes by hand is difficult and time-consuming.”

She breaks up projects and papers so she’s not doing too much in one day. “I use technology when I can to make things easier. And I’m learning how to budget my time.”

Her first year of school went really well. In fact, it was easier than high school because she could schedule her classes later in the day. “Mornings are difficult for me,” said the Peabody Veterans Memorial High School graduate. “In the mornings, I don’t have a lot of energy.”

Erica is able to get more done in the afternoons when she has more energy.

Erica has another year of classes left to take. She takes only 2-3 classes at a time because of her health. “I don’t want to overwhelm myself too much.”

This last year was particularly difficult for Erica. She worked through health challenges, grieving the loss of her grandfather, and changes with her medical team, Loree said. “She still managed to stay on track with her classes. We are very proud of her.”

Some teachers don’t understand her limitations, but when she explains her reasons for why she can’t do something, they say it makes sense. In that way, Erica is raising awareness about Mito. She’s also written papers for classes on disability awareness. In a science class she took last year, she did speeches about living with a chronic illness.

“One of my things is trying to explain Mito to people without overwhelming them, but make them understand it at the same time,” she said.

And that’s what teaching is all about.