



The Courage to Dream

by Joy Bennett

Choosing hope over fear, Emily Shanahan is embracing the work God has uniquely enabled her to do.

By the world's yardstick, Emily Shanahan doesn't measure up. Our material culture tends to value beauty, achievement, intellectual prowess, and financial success with little regard for those who can't make it in the fast lane.

But Emily, like each of us, is far more than the sum of her skills. She is a beautiful young woman brimming with ideas, love for God, hope for the future, and a vision for ministering to others like herself — the “differently enabled.”

PHOTO PROVIDED BY EMILY SHANAHAN

Born with cerebral palsy, Emily finds her self-worth in Jesus because, even though she lives in a body that displays the brokenness in the world, she knows she is made in the image of God. She believes God has a purpose for her life, and He placed her in the body of Christ to share what He has uniquely equipped her to contribute. Emily has a vision for sharing the hope and worth she finds in Christ with others who are differently enabled and drowning in despair.

Emily graduated from Cedarville in 2011 with a degree in comprehensive communication and minors in Spanish and Bible. This was no ordinary accomplishment, however, as she navigated her way to this degree with the expert assistance of “Emily’s Dream Team,” her crew of 145 assistants over four years. Dream Team members helped her with personal care (meals, bathing, restroom trips), academic work, and office administration.

While Emily has overcome so much and achieved a great deal, it wasn’t always easy. She had to overcome insecurities, weaknesses, and sometimes paralyzing fears as she trusted God to lead her.

Looking Up for Hope

It was at her fifth birthday party when Emily began to understand the long and difficult road that lay ahead. She saw for the first time that her friends could climb in and out of the ball pit on their own, but she needed someone to lift her in. She realized for the first time that she was different. The thought stayed with her throughout the day and into the next afternoon when she began to sob.

Her mother came running and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“My legs are useless,” she replied. “They have no purpose except to put cute socks on. They are like ornaments,” she replied.

Her mom, who was struggling with her own response to her daughter’s condition,

tried to comfort her 5-year-old daughter. She held her close and told her God loved her, but Emily couldn’t be consoled. She cried for three days.

It was a song about heaven, by Joni Eareckson Tada, that caught her attention. When Emily’s mother heard a lyric about “pushing up daisies,” she rushed to turn it off for fear that Emily would be upset.

But Emily protested, “Please don’t turn it off! This song says I won’t be stuck in this body forever!”

She heard a message of hope and salvation through Jesus, even in the midst of her brokenness and grief. It’s this eternal perspective that has carried her, and will continue to carry her, through each trial.

Stepping Out in Faith

Emily knew that attending Cedarville as a differently enabled residential student would be difficult. She firmly believed God had led her to that decision, and from the age of 9, she spent much of her prayer time asking Him to show up and guide her through each step. She also relied on a team of advisors she calls “The Emily Achievement Council.” The



Make the Most of the Opportunity

Shanahans were involved in many meetings with University staff and administrators as all involved worked through what it would take to move Emily onto campus. They developed a plan to help her realize her dream of a Christian education while living with daily independence.

The first several weeks on campus were much more challenging than she, or her family, anticipated. Since age 11, Emily had spent a few weeks each summer at SpringHill Camps. In that Christ-centered environment, she experienced a measure of independence as well as inclusion with other campers and one-on-one assistance as needed from a trained special needs counselor. Moving onto a college campus was completely different.

“I had all these people on my team scheduled and trained to help me,” she said, “but I didn’t know them at all. They were going to brush my teeth, help me in the shower, and put clothes on me. I tried to rationalize my fears away, but I was still nervous.” It was staggering to think that complete strangers were willing to enter in her life in such an intimate way.

Emily has struggled with pride and fear of failure just like anyone else. Even though she graduated from high school with honors, math was never her strong suit. In her freshman year at Cedarville, she was fighting to keep up in a college-prep math class. Near the end of the semester, Emily learned from her professor that her grade was on the line, and the next test was critical — if she passed, she would pass the class. If she failed, she would fail the class. She was troubled by the stakes and felt embarrassed because she had always done well in school. She had worked



Emily Shanahan was one of three 2011 recipients of the President’s Trophy. This award, the highest honor given to a graduating senior, recognizes leadership, ministry, community, athletics, campus involvement, and academic achievement.

hard all semester, and she didn’t want to waste the tuition she’d paid.

Right after she spoke with her professor, Emily met a friend who was helping her with academics. “She could tell I was upset,” said Emily. “So I said, ‘I’ll explain later, but we need to read from Scripture right now because I am really scared.’ My friend nodded, opened her computer, and logged on to Bible Gateway. She pulled up Psalm 27 and sang it to me in Spanish while I read the words in English. To this day, I go to that psalm when I’m fearful, and I had my friend teach me to sing it in Spanish.”

Conversations like this, and friends who were willing to help her work through her fears, weave through Emily’s story.

Reaching Out in Love

The Shanahans know they have something important to give back to the differently enabled community. They have learned how to thrive in a world that runs circles around those with physical, developmental, or mental challenges. Emily’s parents are passionate about helping other families develop their own “achievement councils.” They are working to develop this passion into a

nonprofit organization, including plans for a ministry center. They want to give families a biblically based, relational, and resource-filled “road map,” based on Proverbs 15:22 — “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”

They hope to model a method of advocacy that radiates Christ’s love and promotes collaboration from all aspects of life: medical, educational, spiritual, financial, social, and more. They plan to use what they have learned to help others obtain or customize existing equipment, assist with computer technology, and provide guidance for assembling personal care teams like Emily’s Dream Team.

With her bachelor’s degree completed and a vision for the future in mind, Emily continues moving forward. She has begun an online master’s degree at Anderson University in Christian ministry, with a concentration in nonprofit management. Emily plans to pursue motivational speaking, writing, and radio broadcasts in order to speak God’s hope into lives of others who are differently enabled.

Even though the world might define Emily by her physical capacity, she has found her self-worth in God. She has not retreated from life, rather she dares to believe God truly has a plan and purpose that is uniquely hers to fulfill. She has not allowed her fears to defeat her. She prefers to push through her fears to make the dreams God has given her into realities. ■

Joy Bennett, a 1998 graduate of Cedarville University, works as a freelance writer and lives in Mason, Ohio, with her husband, Scott, and their three children. She blogs at joyinthisjourney.com.

Emily Shanahan, a 2011 graduate of Cedarville University, is a graduate student at Anderson University. Visit her website at tomsdigitalphotos.com/emily.

The Dream Continues

In 2007, Cedarville’s maintenance staff completely renovated a women’s residence hall room in preparation for Emily Shanahan’s arrival. Crews consolidated two rooms on the first floor into one large, accessible room with a private bathroom, sleeping area for an overnight assistant, and a rail system capable of helping Emily move from her bed to the bath.

From the beginning, Emily and her parents were closely involved in the room’s layout, including guidance for where grab bars should be installed and choosing appropriate bathroom fixtures. Even as they prepared a unique space that would meet Emily’s needs, they were thinking ahead to students who would use the space after Emily graduated.

Elizabeth Ewart ’15, a political science major from Beavercreek, Ohio, is using the room today. She and Emily met many years ago when the two were enrolled in a therapeutic ballet class for children. Emily and her mother mentored Elizabeth and her mother through the transition process into college.

“We had a lot of fears about my coming to college. It was hard to even think about how it would all work out,” Elizabeth said. She had planned to attend a state university closer to home that is nationally ranked for its disability services. “During my junior year in high school, Emily’s mom invited us to campus to visit Emily, then a junior at Cedarville. When I saw the accessible room, the way the campus was laid out, and the services Cedarville provided, I began to think, ‘I can handle this.’ I could see myself at Cedarville.”

In Emily’s four years at Cedarville, she and her family continually made adjustments until they developed a system designed for her success. Their trial and error provided Elizabeth with a ready-made model, from a sample course schedule to groundwork for Elizabeth’s team of “Soul Sisters” (she’s got some “Soul Brothers,” too). “I was able to adapt their model, that they’d made from scratch, to fit my needs,” said Elizabeth. “It was a blessing to be able to start at 98 percent instead of at zero.”