

# Worcester Telegram & Gazette

## Westboro woman exemplifies tenacity



Katie Atchue, 20, types on a communication device called a DynaVox at her home. (T&G Staff Photos/TOM RETTIG)

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Katie Atchue types "Try, try again" on her DynaVox.

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Katie Atchue and her mother, Joan M. Atchue.

**“ You never know where life is going to take you. ”**

-- JOAN M. ATCHUE

**WESTBORO** —When she was 8 years old, Katie Atchue was playing at home during a February vacation when she complained of a headache. Her mom, Joan, suggested she lie down. Later, the child began vomiting and it was clear that something was not right.

Katie was rushed to the hospital where it was discovered she had experienced a massive bleed in her brain. She was diagnosed with an AVM — an Arteriovenous Malformation which is a malformation in the way arteries and veins connect within the brain. AVMs are usually present at birth, and many people can live their lives unaffected by an AVM.

But Katie is among a small percentage whose AVM ruptured, leaving her unable to speak, eat, walk or even hold up her head.

“She had no means of communication,” Mrs. Atchue said. “We had no idea what was going on in there.”

However, there was plenty going on inside Katie, who battled back.

Katie is now 20 and prefers to be called Kate. She has not only regained many of the functions that were lost 12 years ago — dressing herself, shaking her head yes or no — but she plays basketball, is in a school chorus and she's preparing for her part in a production of “12 Angry Pigs.”

“Her neurosurgeon still calls her his miracle patient,” Mrs. Atchue said, sitting at her kitchen table with her husband, Bruce.

In the last 10 years, Katie has gone from a child who was in a coma for six weeks and whose parents were uncertain if she would survive, to a vibrant, funny and determined young adult who volunteers with animals, works at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts and at a local department store.

Ms. Atchue was in the hospital from February to May 2000, where she had the AVM removed. She spent the next six months in rehab. It was there she worked with a speech therapist and learned that while the AVM rupture stole her ability to speak, Ms. Atchue could learn alternative forms of communication.

“The therapist would come in and hold up a picture and ask Katie to look at the apple in the picture, and she'd look with her eyes,” Mrs. Atchue said. “That was when we knew there was a lot happening inside.”

Ms. Atchue had learned some sign language, which she uses at home with her family, but the AVM affected her fine motor skills, so she is limited in her ability to converse by signing.

Ms. Atchue speaks through a DynaVox, a 10-pound computer about the size of a laptop that speaks for Ms. Atchue, either by speaking stored phrases that Ms. Atchue presses with her fingers, or whole sentences that Ms. Atchue types out herself on a keyboard.

Ms. Atchue got the DynaVox at the Cotting School in Lexington, which she has attended since 2001 and where she is currently her class president, an accomplishment that she can't wait to share with people she meets.

"Never give up," Ms. Atchue said, typing the phrase into her DynaVox. "My motto is try, try again."

"The Cotting School has given her a voice; the DynaVox has given her a voice," Mrs. Atchue said.

Through the Project Bridges program at the Cotting School, she has volunteered at Buddy Dogs, and said one day she would like to be a dog trainer. Scrapbooking is one of her favorite hobbies, and over the years she has produced several volumes. There are pages devoted to her prom at the Cotting School; of baby birds that were found outside the family's Cedar Street home; of herself as a child before the AVM; and more recent photos of the family vacation to Old Orchard Beach and of her brother Chris — who she says by way of placing her hands behind her back as if being handcuffed, is a police officer.

And among those books are scrapbooks for each of the animals at Buddy Dog Humane Society. In addition, Ms. Atchue makes fleece-covered beds for the animals.

Though Ms. Atchue can walk, she uses a walker when she is not home, mostly to help her maintain her balance. The walker has a tray for her DynaVox, so she can speak, and she usually brings her social service dog Cabot, a short-haired collie, to help make her more approachable when she is in public.

"He gives kisses," she said, through her DynaVox, adding that he also takes hand commands such as down, stay under and high-five.

Ms. Atchue still has residual effects from the AVM — she's had bouts of pneumonia and multiple surgeries; she still has a feeding tube; has problems with her short-term memory and she has some breathing issues. But none of that has stopped her.

Now, she volunteers at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts on Lyman Street, one day every other week, filing, folding brochures, shredding and other office work, under the guidance of a job coach.

"When people see her come in, she's always so cheerful, and so positive," said Pamela M. Bush, director of communications at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. "She just has a beauty that makes you feel so warm. She's always doing her darnedest to do her job and do it right."

Ms. Atchue has moved on from the humane society and now, through the Project Bridges program, works at a TJ Maxx in Bedford twice a week, in the backroom

processing shoes, where, her mom says, she gets a preview of all of the new shoe styles each season.

Through the Brain Injury Association, Ms. Atchue also participates in the PALS program, which aims to reduce isolation, often suffered by brain injury survivors, by pairing them with a buddy. Brain injury survivors age 16 and older are matched with volunteers with similar interests. Ms. Atchue has two PALS — a high school student from Medway who frequently visits her in Westboro, and a college student from Westboro who had an AVM that did not affect her as severely as Ms. Atchue's.

“That's the hardest part,” Mrs. Atchue said. “When this first happened, the community rallied around Katie, her friends rallied around Katie. But as they get older, her friends go off to college and move on. Through the PALS program, Katie has friends her own age, good peer relationships.”

With her PALS, Ms. Atchue scrapbooks, sews, goes to the movies and plays board games. Ms. Atchue makes a brushing motion with her hands, meaning her time with her friends allows her parents to go out together.

“She needs to feel like a productive member of society,” Mrs. Atchue said.

Ms. Atchue is nothing if not determined. Each year, Mrs. Atchue would review with her daughter the list of activities at the Cotting School, and Ms. Atchue persisted on signing up for chorus. Mrs. Atchue approached the chorus instructor, who said not to worry — the songs are loaded on to the DynaVox and Katie sings through the device.

“So one day they asked, who wanted to do a solo? And there was my daughter, raising her hand,” Mrs. Atchue said, laughing. “She got a solo in the chorus production. For her to want to do that and say, ‘Yeah, I want a solo,’ it just goes to show you, you never know where life is going to take you. It goes to show you who she is. This just doesn't stop her.”