



MIZZOU

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Gabriella's take

Student determined to become a film director

Story and photos by Shane Epping

Gabriella Garbero met several people who attended [Mizzou](#), and she always liked them. There was never a question in her mind that she'd wear black and gold someday, and when she moved from [St. Louis](#) to [Columbia](#) in 2009, she loved the campus, her roommate, her classes and her proximity to downtown. So, although Gabriella's intuition had led her happily to Mizzou, there was one thing missing.

Gabriella wanted to be a movie director, but MU did not offer a major in film. Luckily, during a visit to the Geology Building auditorium late in her freshman year, she picked up a Maneater student newspaper that was lying on a table. Gabriella read that Mizzou had introduced a new [film studies major](#). The timing was perfect. Within a year, she had written, directed and screened her first movie on campus — her proudest moment so far as an MU student. But such accomplishments didn't come without obstacles related to her disability.

Alternate content

When Gabriella's mother, Kelley, was pregnant, she had no reason to believe that there would be a problem. The pregnancy proceeded without complication, and an occasional kick from her unborn baby reminded Kelley of good things to come. She wouldn't realize until carrying her second child that Gabriella's kicks were softer than the norm. Kelley gave birth to Gabriella Jan. 17, 1991. She and husband Matt took her home and began life as a family of three.

So, although Gabriella could crawl and stand at age 1, she seemed to struggle, and she sometimes cried upon standing. Soon her parents noticed her efforts to move diminish, and they worried that something might be wrong. A trip to the doctor revealed that Gabriella had significant muscle weakness. Tests followed. Results took two long weeks. "My neurologist

gave me a little piece of paper, about an inch by two inches, that he'd just photocopied out of his dictionary that said 'Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) — frequent pneumonia and scoliosis,' " Kelley says. "He didn't tell me anything else."

SMA is a motor neuron disease that occurs in 25 percent of children when both parents carry the recessive gene. It weakens muscles, particularly those closest to the shoulders, hips and back. Patients fall into one of four SMA types, with Type 1 being the most severe. Gabriella has Type 2, which means she can't walk and requires help for basic needs such as brushing her teeth, opening doors, using the restroom, and getting in and out of bed.

As with most SMA patients, Gabriella's brain is unharmed. "It's hard to explain, but when I look in the mirror, I don't see the wheelchair," she says. "I just see me. That's literally what I see, and it's weird."

The disease is also lost on Gabriella's best friend from high school, Rémy Morgan. Once when Gabriella's mom was driving them to the movies and she parked in a handicapped spot, Rémy spoke out. "I got a little offended that she would just take that spot away from someone who was really disabled," she says. "I had to be reminded that Gabriella is, in fact, entitled to disabled parking." Another time, at a high school dance, Gabriella and Rémy were looking for a friend but couldn't see through the crowd because they're both "vertically challenged." Gabriella told Rémy to stand on the back of her wheelchair to get a better view. "That's when a teacher pulled us over and gave a lecture about how I shouldn't just climb on someone's wheelchair," Rémy says. "Gabriella tried to say that she invited me to do it, but the teacher ignored her." As soon as the teacher left, they had a good laugh. In making the best of a difficult situation, they were playing out a major theme in Gabriella's life.

If I couldn't do something, I had to imagine how it was done,"
Gabriella says. "I had to imagine how my friends felt when doing it."

That theme started early. When she was 5 years old, she attended a preschool where students signed up for jobs each morning upon arrival so they'd have something to do right away. One day, Gabriella was running late, and the only remaining job was listed at the top of the sign-up sheet. Problem was, her disease wouldn't allow her to reach to that spot on the page. So Gabriella flipped the clipboard around to put the line within reach. But to make her signature look right on the page, she had to write it backward and upside down. Problem solved.

"Gabriella compensates for physical challenges with intellect," dad Matt says. She has grown up watching people around her experience activities that her disease denies.

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Gabriella fell in love with Mizzou at age 16, when she first visited campus. A couple of years later, she graduated from Parkway West High School, moved to Mizzou, pledged Kappa Kappa Gamma (KKG) sorority and started college. As a sophomore, Gabriella moved into the

KKG house and lived on the first floor in a room the sorority remodeled for her. The accommodations were spacious but separate from the other sorority members whose rooms were upstairs. This physical distance and a bout of mononucleosis may have contributed to Gabriella feeling disconnected from the group. After thinking it over, she moved out of the house late that year. She faults no one and says she would do it again.

The sophomore experience became fodder for Gabriella's storytelling passion and inspired her to write and direct a film, *Where You Tend to a Rose*. The main character is a young female painter who lives in a largely black and white world that contains occasional bits and pieces of color. By the end of the five-minute narrative, the character has painted a picture on a previously blank canvas that's revealed in full color. It was an expression, perhaps, of her first two years at MU, a time when many young people explore their surroundings, steady their focus and capture the decisive moment.

Watching audiences enjoy her work at the [Silver Screen Film Festival](#) in April 2011 on campus was Gabriella's best experience at Mizzou so far. "People I've never met were seeing it and clapping," she says. "It was unreal." She is the head of production for MU's Film Production Club and is working on three screenplays.

Chip Gubera, her instructor for Introduction to Entertainment Media, thinks her chances of becoming a director are as good as anyone's. He credits Gabriella's potential for success to her ability to win people over, follow directions and be creative. "Her work is superior, but it's a tough business. Period. If she keeps up the hard work and she keeps going for it, I think she has a chance. The professional world requires that you have your own voice," Gubera says. "She has her own voice."

Occasionally, through no fault of her own, Gabriella's voice is difficult to hear, such as the day she missed Gubera's class. "Once it was over — and this is an hour and fifteen-minute session — I found Gabriella waiting for me outside of my office," Gubera says. She explained that the Engineering Building West Hall elevator was broken and that she couldn't make it up the stairs. Gubera felt terrible. "I get emails from students when it snows a quarter of an inch and they're like, 'I'm not risking my life to come into class today.' Whereas Gabriella waits around to tell me face-to-face instead of sending an email. That's an admirable quality."

Gabriella looks different because she is in a wheelchair, and it's easy to assume that she isn't normal. But in every way, except for having some weak muscles, she is indistinguishable from her collegiate peers. She wants to marry, have children, pursue a career and enjoy her life. "Everybody wants to be loved," mom Kelley says. "That's the only thing that keeps us all sort of on the same level."

Kelley says the University of Missouri welcomed her daughter with a graceful approach: Treat everyone the same. From that base, Kelley adds, "We can focus on all the things that it takes to get Gabriella out the door." But what she really wants is for others to see what she can do.

Sometimes Gabriella gets discouraged when people don't take the time to get to know her. "You know, it's really OK. Trust me," she says. "I've been dealing with it [the disease] my

whole life, and it's not that big of a deal." Her parents agree. They never hesitated to have a second child. "I couldn't tell Gabriella, 'I don't want another one like you,'" Kelley says. Gabriella's brother, John, is five years younger and does not have SMA. "Both of our kids are wonderful blessings to each other and to our families," Kelley says.




Gabriella knows there's a plan for her. After graduation in 2013, she plans to go to California. She wants to attend graduate school where she can be close to the movie industry and pursue her dream of becoming a director. "There's nothing else that I feel like I could truly see myself doing. If more people did what they wanted to do and not what they felt like they had to do, the world would be a little bit stronger," she says. "If I can help with that, then I will have done my part." She's aware of Hollywood's competitiveness, but poor odds have never been a deterrent. "Even though it's hard, it's life and you can't keep being sad about the cards that you're dealt."

In first grade, Gabriella had a second surgery to help strengthen and straighten her back. The doctors removed two of her ribs, ground them and packed them around her spine. During recovery, she stopped breathing and turned blue. "It's heart wrenching to see your child suffer through such an experience," Matt says. But he also has seen Gabriella take on many of life's challenges. "You can't help but think about all that she's been through and the strength she's had to have. That's pretty good."

A fighter since she first crawled as an infant, Gabriella puts one foot in front of the other and moves forward.

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