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A gift for music

Born blind, young teen sees the world one note at a time

By Bruce Crippen
 Post staff reporter

She never flips a light switch when she enters a dark room. Her world is dark. It always will be.

Fourteen-year-old Emily Hogeback was born blind. At birth, her retinas were detached and there was blood in her eyes.

Her twin sister, Mary, died only two hours after birth. They were born more than three-and-a-half months early. Emily weighed a pound at birth, She came home six months later weighing only six pounds.

Emily was introduced to a violin by a teacher at the Association for the Blind when she was 4. She taught herself to play. Ever since, music has dominated her life.

"Music is my passion," she says with an enthusiastic grin.

Emily lives and breathes music. She does guest artist stints at schools, most recently at Yealey Elementary in Florence. She plays fiddle and Dobro in a country and bluegrass band and regularly takes part in jam sessions around the area.

"When she's not playing, she's listening," said her father, Mark. "If she's not listening, she's playing."

At night in her Colerain Township home, Emily goes to bed listening to her XM satellite radio. She listens to one verse and when the second starts, she plays along.

Her gift is perfect pitch. She can listen to a musical note and can tell what note it is.

It's not unusual for the blind to be more in tune with what they hear, said John Clark, a professor of audiology and hearing rehabilitation in the College of Allied Health Sciences at the University of Cincinnati.



ZOOM BRUCE CRIPPEN/The Post
 Emily Hogeback, with her mother Debbie, is thrilled after finishing her homework.

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He said the blind people train themselves subconsciously to compensate for their lack of vision, even though there usually is no difference in how well their hearing works.

"A blind person's hearing is not more acute in that you can physiologically test it," Clark said. "I don't believe there is any measurable difference in hearing between a person who is blind and a person who is not blind," Clark said.

But Emily and others without sight often become more in tune with their other senses.

At Yealey Elementary, where she and her family have known the music teacher Wayne Luessen for years, she demonstrated her touch with music.

As the students walked into the music room, some looked warily at the girl wearing sunglasses. "I love music," she told them. "My favorite is country and bluegrass."

Some of the students know the name of the artists she talks about. Emily holds up a doll in the likeness of country artist Taylor Swift. She has others - Carrie Hasler, Alisha Nugent and Donna Hughes.

"I like to play along with their CDs," she tells the students.

Finally, when she's ready to play, Luessen leads her to the Dobro, a resonating electric slide guitar on a stand. He puts on a country song and Emily plays along. The kids are wowed.

Song after song, Emily plays her Dobro and then her fiddle. The music is lively. Some of the kids can't help getting up to move with the music.

Although he hasn't played much lately, Luessen offers to play a duet. Embarrassed, he smiles as he misses a note, but they sound great together. They play in the group "The Six Pac Band," which was formed by Luessen.

Everywhere she goes, Emily puts music students to the test for perfect pitch. Experts say only one in 100,000 have the ear for perfect pitch, or the ability to identify or produce a musical note without reference to another note.

As a volunteer sits in the middle of the room and hits a note on a xylophone, Emily correctly names it. Over and over, she nails the notes as fast as they are played. The students in the music class, however, continue to fall by the wayside.

Finally, only two students and Emily have survived the elimination. They sit beside her in the middle of the room. A volunteer plays a note. One student says it's an A. The other says D. Both are wrong, and Emily still hasn't found a person with perfect pitch.

Emily attends Pleasant Run Middle School in Springfield Township. Because of her disability, she is in a special education class. The bus drops her off in front of her house at 2:30 p.m. Her mom, Debbie, meets her when she gets off.

Once inside the house, they joke as they get ready for homework.

"The teacher makes me keep my eyes open at school. She thinks I'm sleeping. Why do I need my eyes anyway?" she says.

Emily does her homework on a Perkins Braille, a "braille typewriter" with a key corresponding to each of the six dots of the braille code.

Her mother helps her find the letters on the page. Emily is searching three words to tell which ones are

nouns, and then writing the words in braille. She gets them right until she has to spell knife. As she bangs the keys on the brailler, it comes up "kinfe."

"I messed up. I can't erase," she says. She's frustrated, but laughs along with her mother.

After 20 agonizing questions, the homework is finished. Emily finally heads for her room and her music. A CD fills the room with music as she starts jumping to the beat. Clearly, it's music that makes her happy.

Photographs and posters of singers line the walls in her room. Some have ticket stubs attached. She will never see them, but she knows them in her hearing world.

"Every year we take a three-day trip to Nashville to listen to music," her father said. He and his wife love music too. He recently bought a string bass and is learning to play.

The family goes to jams around town. There's one at the House of Restoration Church in Milford, and the weekly jam at the Whitewater Community Center every Thursday that Emily attends after her violin lesson.

Bands look forward to Emily playing with them. When she's not there people ask "Where is the blind fiddle player?"

Recently, two other bands have asked Emily to join them.

"I know I'll never buy her a car, so I'll use the money to get her a fine instrument," her dad said. "She'll be able to use it for the rest of her life."

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