

# Paralyzed teen with PTSD keeps her eye on the target

Premium content

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Gabrielle Goodland bites down on her mouth release as she practises archery in the gym of Ecole Secondaire du Sommet. The 13-year-old archer has limited use of her right arm and is partially blind in her left eye. The challenges haven't stopped her as she gets ready for the 2024 Paralympics. - Eric Wynne

Like everything in her life, it can be done. She just needs to find the Gabby way.

Paralyzed right arm dangling at her side, 13-year-old Gabrielle Goodland pulls an arrow from the quiver and notches it into place. She grips the small plastic mouthpiece tight in her teeth and draws back the string. Her stance is strong, her right eye focused.

With a deep breath, release. A thwack echoes in the otherwise empty school gym, and an arrow wobbles in the bullseye. The inner satisfaction doesn't show as Gabby pulls another arrow and resets.

With paralysis on her right side, blindness in her left eye and a PTSD diagnosis, she's had to find the Gabby way over and over in her young life.

But Gabby has a bright future ahead of her, in life and sport. She has terrific grades at École Secondaire du Sommet in Bedford and plans to become a criminal attorney. She's excelling in archery and, with the help of a private coach, she's training for the 2024 Paralympics in Paris.

But just a year ago, her outlook was nowhere near this optimistic.

### A brother she never knew

For Gabby's family and many others, Sept. 11, 2001 was filled with depthless grief. For the Goodlands, that was the day four-year-old Hunter died.

Gabby's mother Melanie has a pair of photos in her wallet of Gabby and Hunter as toddlers.

"They look like twins."

It could be one of the reasons Gabby has always had a connection to her older brother, who died five years before she was born.

"She seems to have this, I don't know if it's a fascination, I don't know what it is, but she always remembers his birthday, she always remembers his anniversary," Melanie said.

"There's a connection there that I don't know where it came from."

Hunter was taken off life support on Sept. 11. Days earlier, he had a complication from a tonsillectomy.

Hunter is one of the reasons Gabby picked up a bow.

"It gives me a bit of connection with him, like, I'm doing it for him," said Gabby.

Their grandfather was big into archery (he shot with a longbow) and little Hunter was keen to try.

"My dad had a custom-made bow made for him, but unfortunately (Hunter) passed away before he could hold it," Melanie said.



Photos of Gabrielle Goodland and her brother Hunter, who passed away at the age of four, years before she was born. - Eric Wynne

## Paralysis, age two

As a toddler, Gabby had a cold and her immune system went overboard fighting it off, resulting in brachial plexus neuropathy.

Gabby has a great way of explaining it: "You know when your body tries to cure you? Mine did it funny and I was left paralyzed."

She's paralyzed from her right ear down to her hip. But her fingers work, to the astonishment and puzzlement of her doctors. Since she was little, Melanie said, Gabby has found a way to swing her arm in the direction she wants it to go, then use her fingers to crabwalk over to where she needs it.

But coping with paralysis wasn't the end of her troubles. When she was nine, they discovered Gabby was blind in her left eye.

"So she's paralyzed in the right and she's blind in the left," Melanie said.

The blindness is unrelated to the paralysis. Gabby was just born without an optic nerve.

## Never give up

Gabby's first attempt with a bow at the age of nine was frustrating, and no one would have blamed her for tossing it aside and giving up.

"I've always taught her that there's nothing she can't do, she just has to figure out how to do it the Gabby way," said Melanie.

But she couldn't shoot and felt bad about it. Her teacher recommended speaking to someone in parasports, and within a couple of days they met with someone who introduced Gabby to a bow with a mouthpiece.

"She was there for three hours straight," said Melanie. "She did not stop, she just kept going."

And Gabby hasn't looked back. When she started at Sommet, she joined the National Archery in the Schools Program with kids of all kinds of abilities.

Coach and school vice-principal Sam Samson said many kids who don't feel comfortable in other sports turn to archery.

"Those are students who typically fall off the radar and don't get to participate in sports."

It works for kids with all kinds of challenges, he said. The sport draws kids with ADHD and anxiety, as it teaches them to block out distractions and focus on their target.

"The students that find themselves having difficulty working with others find their place here. They are able to concentrate, able to succeed, able to see progress. For some, it's the only progress they've ever seen," he said.

"If you find success, or find that you are valued in something, that changes your whole outlook on things. Knowing that you're good here ... when you're in the classroom facing difficulty, you're able to go on."

Even mastery in English (or French) isn't a necessity. After a lengthy introduction with a heavy emphasis on safety, Samson uses whistle commands to direct archers.

Beyond focus, archers learn to let a missed arrow go. Not a bad life lesson to master at a young age.

"Some of my best archers, their worst challenge in life is they shot a bad arrow and they fall apart. My better archers now have got to the point ... that that arrow is gone, it's finished. 'I'll just adjust, I saw what I did wrong, let's go back.' "