



Emerson Ramey

South Lyon High School

2020 Perseverance Award Winner

Third grade was the year that everything went upside down for Emerson Ramey.

She remembers it clearly: Runny noses. Kids sweating. Certain smells. Sensations that didn't used to bother her suddenly became overwhelming to the point that she couldn't interact with others—she cried, she ran, she hid.

“At only 8-years old, I sobbed every day and refused to be forced out of my house. I feared everything and anything unexpected,” Emerson said. “With my heart always pounding, my body always going numb, and blackness always closing in, school became a prison for me.”

It was a crippling anxiety that seemed to come out of nowhere, and her family realized quickly that she needed additional tools to learn how to cope. “Face your fears’ soon became a phrase I heard daily,” she remembered, and every unexpected turn of events became a test of courage for her. Instead of sitting at a desk among classmates, she needed her own space, sometimes isolating herself behind a bookshelf in the back of the classroom. Instead of eating in the cafeteria and playing outside at recess, she took her lunch to the office and colored pictures, alone.

Step by step, Emerson forced herself to be brave. Eventually, she moved from behind the bookshelf. She agreed to go outside with one friend and sit on the swings. She had a stress ball, when she got nervous she'd drink water. Slowly but surely, it began to work. By the time she was in fourth grade, Emerson felt confident enough to join a swim team. She still struggled with incredible anxiety, but the competition seemed to motivate not frighten her. At school, she said the staff at Kent Lake Elementary was amazingly supportive, especially Mrs. Hilton, who described Emerson as having “a heart of gold” and being “built of a determination I had never seen in my 13 years of teaching.”

“Emerson is a student that touched my life forever,” said Mrs. Hilton. “(She) was an inspiration to me and many of her peers as well as other teachers in our building. We watched her push through her daily struggles and come out on top each time ... Students realized if Emerson could rise above her challenges they too could have the confidence to give it a try, as well.”

So, day after day, month after month, year after year, Emerson faced her fears. She went to school, she made friends. Things got progressively easier, though not always—the anxiety never really went away. She tried out lots of different sports, but stuck with swimming. After starting on the South Lyon Sea Lions, she swam in middle school and then in high school all four years, to great success. She earned the Most Improved award her sophomore year, the Most Valuable Swimmer award her senior year, and three varsity letters. She consistently qualified for county and state competition, earning the conference title twice and two All State awards. In addition to her swimming, she has served as a volunteer for the Humane Society of Huron Valley, was a LINK leader and mentor, a part of the Eco Club, and performed a variety of community service as a member of the National Honors Society.

And now, thanks to her enduring courage and the support of others, the sky is the limit for Emerson—she will be studying astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Michigan in the fall.

“I’m ready to challenge myself,” she said. “I have learned that to get what I really want in life, I must push past my limits.”

The South Lyon Educational Foundation is proud to recognize Emerson’s strength and perseverance in fighting such a long and difficult battle, and is honored to present her with our 2020 Perseverance Award. Congratulations, Emerson!