

Wisconsin Teen and School Nurse Team Up to Educate School about Epilepsy



Elizabeth Barrett with her school nurse Kitty Murphy.

Many schools bring in a health expert to train teachers and staff about epilepsy when a student experiences seizures.

After Elizabeth Barrett of Sauk Prairie High School in Prairie du Sac, Wis., began having seizures at school, the school was lucky to find a well-prepared and gifted trainer: Elizabeth herself.

Elizabeth, 16, started having seizures at age 7. She had approximately one focal or absence seizure per year, always at home. Her seizures followed such a regular pattern that she never had a seizure management plan at school and was seizure-free for most of middle school. When she had her first tonic-clonic seizure at the end of her eighth grade year, school officials were surprised. None of her teachers even knew she had epilepsy.

Epilepsy Foundation. More than 20 individuals attended, including the principal, vice principal, office staff, Elizabeth's guidance counselor, her teachers and four or five of her closest friends.

Kitty, as a trained health educator, covered the basic facts about epilepsy, including the causes and types of seizures, and how to administer first aid. Elizabeth shared her personal experiences. "I told them about what it's like after having a seizure," she explained. "It truly can be a frightening experience and I wanted them to understand what a person goes through."

Her hard work paid off. A few weeks after delivering the training, Elizabeth had a tonic-clonic seizure in the school hallway and injured her nose as she fell. Several of the teachers and friends who had attended the training were present.

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As she entered high school, her father, Matthew, indicated on her school form that his daughter had epilepsy and the school nurse, Kitty Murphy, called him to develop a basic plan of action.

In February, Elizabeth unexpectedly had two seizures within a week, breaking her regular pattern. She decided that it would be a good idea to educate her teachers and approached Kitty to ask if she would help her plan a training. Kitty readily agreed.

"Elizabeth had a clear goal," the school nurse said. "She needed the people around her to know what to do."

The fact that the training would be delivered by Elizabeth herself presented a great opportunity. "As a health educator, I know what an impact personal stories can have," Kitty explained. "People are more likely to listen and to internalize the information when it comes from the person themselves. But it is very important that the person be a responsible spokesperson and present all of the facts accurately."

The two worked together to plan and deliver the training, gathering materials and handouts from the

"They did great," Kitty recounted. "In fact, I don't think they even realize just how great they did. Several of them checked in with me afterwards to review how they had responded and ask how they could do better next time."

Many other classmates witnessed Elizabeth's seizure and were confused and worried, so she and Murphy decided to conduct another training for Elizabeth's entire class. "The kids seemed interested," Elizabeth noted. "They were receptive and said that the training helped. My friends told me that they definitely learned something new."

Some students might be reluctant to talk about their epilepsy, but Elizabeth feels that it's best to be open about it. "In middle school, I was shy about it. I didn't want to admit that I had epilepsy. But in high school, I became more aware. I wanted people to know about epilepsy and not to be afraid of it. Students with epilepsy shouldn't be afraid to talk about their experiences and educate other people. The experience of telling people about my seizures and teaching them about basic first aid has really helped me."