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Universe of dreams for Natick girl

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Photo caption: Michelle Borkin, 15, meets Stephen Hawking last night at the Wang Center.



Photo credit: MARSHALL WOLFF

Michelle Borkin could not wiggle her toes, crack open a book or smile.

The 15-year-old Natick girl could not even focus her big, brown eyes.

But she could use her mind.

Paralyzed when a bout of the chicken pox led to encephalomyelitis last December, Michelle spent her days

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and her nights in bed, her eyes frozen in place like the rest of her body.

"In one split second, I watched my child lose everything," said her mother, Sandra Borkin. "They told us it could take six months to five years for her to recover. Or she could be affected for the rest of her life."

Meanwhile, there was absolutely nothing Sandra and Sheldon Borkin could do to speed the recovery of their only child.

They could only wait.

So they moved heaven and earth to at least make her happy. For a girl as sweet and gentle-natured as Michelle, that was not hard.

For her, happiness is science. Her mother says as a child Michelle used her doll carriage to collect rocks for study instead of ferrying dolls. Her parents bought audio tapes of science lessons to comfort their daughter as she lay still in her bed.

Listening to the calm, computerized voice of world-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking talking about the universe soothed Michelle. Not only was Hawking turning his physics discoveries into simple lessons, he was talking about how lucky he is to be alive.

Hawking, 57, was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease at age 21 and has spent most of his life paralyzed, though he can move one hand enough to operate a voice computer attached to his wheelchair.

He has written two popular books, including the best seller "A Brief History of Time."

"The realization that I had an incurable disease that was likely to kill me in a few years was a bit of a shock," Hawking wrote in an essay. "How could something like that happen to me?"

"However, while I had been in the hospital, I had seen a boy I vaguely knew die of leukemia, in the bed opposite me," he wrote. "It had not been a pretty sight. Clearly there were people who were worse off than

me....Whenever I feel inclined to be sorry for myself I remember that boy."

To Michelle, those were words of true wisdom.

For as she lay there, waiting to know if she'd ever move her arms or legs again, if she'd ever be able to smile, here was a man who had changed the way the world sees itself.

He proved that Einstein's General Theory of Relativity implied space and time would have a beginning in the Big Bang and end in black holes.

And he did it all from the seat of his wheelchair.

"Hawking speaks so calmly and he explains things so well," said mom Sandra. "He's also got a wonderful sense of humor.

"The first time I saw the corners of Michelle's mouth turn into a smile it was because she was laughing at something he said."

That smile, that first sign that Michelle was coming out of her paralysis ended three months of total immobility.

And she couldn't wait to be able to read Hawking. Without being able to move her eyes, she could only listen to his work.

"He talks about how miniscule we are compared to how big the universe is," Michelle said. "If he could do all this with his life, knowing he would never walk, I knew I could at least get through this. I knew I was very lucky."

So, following in her role model's steps, Michelle willed herself to go back to school.

By late winter, she returned to a few classes a week at Brimmer and May, a private high school in Brookline. She still had difficulties focusing her eyes, balancing and walking. She also sometimes needed to sleep days at a time.

But she refused to stay back in ninth grade, and she had a research project to do, a project on Sir Isaac Newton.

Soon, her studies brought her right back to Hawking.

Michelle researched Newton and Hawking at MIT and Babson College. At Babson, she discovered one of Hawking's earliest pieces of writing. The 1971 paper "Black Holes" earned him first prize in that year's competition of the Gravity Foundation.

She also built a telescope, a "Newtonian reflector," just as Hawking had done.

Her research project earned an award at school. And her determination brought her back to class full time last month, just nine months after being stricken.

In fact, yesterday afternoon, Michelle was playing field hockey. She still can't run, but her teammates adore her so much that they gave her the position of standing right in front of the goalie.

"She stands there and stops the ball," said her mom. "That's really all she can do, but she's so enthusiastic they made her co-captain.

Michelle has an especially hard time balancing at night. So her parents have to help her get outside to study the galaxies from her telescope.

"I use it almost every night," Michelle said. "I need Mom or Dad with me, but I love to study the stars. I want to be an astrophysicist. It's all I can do."

Last night, Michelle got to see the star she'd been following for nine months.

Stephen Hawking came to The Wang Center in Boston for a special lecture, "The Universe in a Nutshell."

WGBH, one of the sponsors, arranged for a private meeting between Michelle and her mentor. Michelle handed Hawking that Babson paper she had discovered, and like Michelle, Hawking smiled.

"Thank you for the inspiration," Michelle told Hawking.

"I'm glad I could help," he replied.

To Michelle's parents, this was full circle.

This was their only daughter meeting the man who pulled her from throes of complete despair.

"Unless you go through something like this, you could never understand," Sandra said. "Once you go through it, life is never the same.

"A teacher once told me the bitter comes with the sweet and you have to find the bitter to appreciate the sweet. Now I finally understand."

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