

# TeenTribune

**Erica Powell, a cheerleader for Clemson University, stands with other cheerleaders during an ESPN Gameday taping before a football game with Florida State University and Clemson.**



## She's a cheerleader. And she's blind.



**By Charmaine Smith-Miles / Anderson Independent-Mail**

Erica Powell has been tumbling, twirling and bending her body doing gymnastics since she was a toddler.

When she suffered an injury between her junior and senior years in high school, she did not stop. She simply switched sports. She went into cheerleading when she was a senior at T.L. Hanna High School.

Because she loved the sport so much, she tried out for the Clemson University Tigers' cheerleading team.

It wasn't until after Erica made that team that the coach realized something about her: the dark-haired, energetic young woman is nearly blind.

Doctors diagnosed retinoblastoma when Erica was 6 months old. She had nine tumors behind one eye and five behind the other. Erica said her mother noticed that she was crying but tears were not forming on her face.

That began trips to Emory University for her. Through some periods, she was traveling to and from the hospital in Atlanta at least once a month. She went through surgeries to have the tumors removed.

But vision problems persisted.

At first, it was as simple as not being able to see the blackboard in class very clearly or not being able to always pick out her parents in a crowded room. But in those early years, she could read textbooks.

When it was time to take her driver's license test, Erica passed it at age 16. She was able to drive, she was preparing for college and competing in gymnastics.

"Getting my driver's license, that was really exciting for me," Erica said. "I really lived a pretty normal life until I was 17 or 18 years old."

But within a couple of years, things began to change with her vision — again.

Her eyesight began to decline because of some of the radiation treatments she went through when she was a child. Fluid was diminishing her ability to be able to see.

"It is making my vision slowly go away," Erica said. "I am getting injections once a month to help me hold on to the vision I have left."

A few years after getting her driver's license, the now 21-year-old needed to turn it over.

She is learning how to listen to audio books and read what she can on her electronic tablet. Her friends and teammates help her get back and forth to where she needs to go. She has learned how to use the Clemson Area Transit bus system. Volunteers with the South Carolina Commission for the Blind helped her set up her apartment so she could use her washing machine, her stove and other household appliances safely.

"When I realized this was getting worse, really fast, that was hard at first," Erica said. "Not being able to drive has been the biggest thing to get used to. It has been tough not having my independence."

But Erica does not dwell on these points.

She talks about her future and her passions.

She is a junior psychology major at Clemson University. She lives just off campus in an apartment with three of her sorority sisters.

Since enrolling at Clemson University, she has also learned that she loves studying law. So she is considering either attending graduate school or obtaining a law degree.

Her other love, aside from those academic pursuits, is cheerleading for the Tigers.

Erica was in Miami cheering on her favorite team at the Orange Bowl at the close of this past football season.

She cannot see much beyond light, shadow and outlines of shapes. But that does not stop her from practicing tumblers, flips and splits.

"I've learned not to treat myself differently," Erica said. "Since I started out with low vision, I have adapted. I love being part of a team. I wanted to be part

of something that would keep me upbeat and active."

**Critical thinking challenge:** *Erica faced challenges in high school and college. What were they?*

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