

## Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Cal Poly student Emily Block works to help others with heart conditions like her own

By Matt Lazier



Cal Poly student Emily Block just before her group spoke with Sen. Dianne Feinstein's staff during a day of lobbying in Washington, D.C. on behalf of the American Heart Association.

All photos courtesy Emily Block

In April, that work took her to Washington, D.C., where she and nearly 500 health care providers, heart disease survivors, and family and friends spent a day lobbying Congress on behalf of the Heart Association. The groups asked representatives to push for more accessible, affordable and adequate health care and to sign a letter to the president asking for increased funding for heart disease and stroke research.

"The American Heart Association does great things," Block said. "Some of the research they've done and pushed for in the past is why I'm still here today."

"It was really fulfilling to be able to give back to that organization and do something that might help someone else in the future."

### Battling back

At only 20 years old, Block has battled back through intense physical therapy to overcome the effects of her strokes. Those impacts were drastic. When the second of the three strokes hit in August 2007, Block's vision was distorted so severely she could barely read.

At that point, she said, her doctors began mentioning the word "stroke." But there was no resolution to her health problem. And two months later, the third and most significant stroke hit, leaving Block weak on her left side, impacting her blood pressure and digestion, and causing her gait to become jerky and uncoordinated.

At Cal Poly's Health Services Center, Dr. David Ralston told Emily he thought she'd had a stroke – and that she might have patent foramen ovale, in which a flap-like opening between the heart's right and left upper chambers fails to close in infancy. Tests confirmed the diagnosis. Block withdrew from school and, on Halloween 2007, had corrective surgery.



Already an honors student, Block refused to give up on her academic excellence. She stayed out of school for the rest of the fall

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Photo of the Year



Emily and some of her team members at last year's American Heart Association Heart Walk in San Luis Obispo County. Left to right: Eric Ward, Cal Poly student and friend of Emily; Stephanie Smith, Cal Poly student and friend of Emily; Emily; and Nancy Block, Emily's mother.

2007 quarter but returned for winter 2008. "I probably shouldn't have come back that soon. My doctors weren't crazy about it," she said. "But I wanted to be back at school. I thought it would be good therapy, and it was."

Physical therapy helped her regain her balance and relearn to walk straight. She hasn't had any strokes since her surgery. But the trauma of the first three triggered an incurable neurological condition called dysautonomia that gives her problems such as low blood pressure, a constantly rapid heart rate, fatigue and light-headedness.

Though these health problems might be uncommon for someone her age, Block tries not to focus her attention on the negative aspects.

"Everyone has their challenges," she said. "This is just my obstacle."

### Looking ahead

Block has long been interested in a career in health care, but she wasn't sure in exactly which area. "Now," she said, "I'm fairly sure that I want to become a physician's assistant and specialize in pediatric cardiology."

That will mean finishing her bachelor's degree in biology at Cal Poly, hopefully in 2011 (she takes no more than three classes a quarter while her recovery continues), then moving on to graduate school.

Block also will continue to work with the American Heart Association. Next up for her is the annual Heart Walk in San Luis Obispo County. It will be her second year in the event after participating in and helping plan the 2008 edition.

The 5K fundraiser walk takes place Oct. 3 in Avila Beach. It's a chance for anyone in the community to learn more about heart disease and strokes. And Block said it's inspiring to be with others who've shared her experience, raising money to help themselves and others who will face the same battle in the future.

She can't imagine not getting involved in fighting heart disease in a broader way. "I've always been interested in public service," she said. "After I had my last stroke, the first thing I did was get on the computer and find out how I could help."

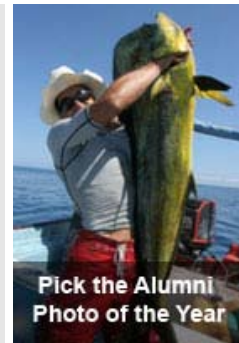
Megan Lara, a grassroots advocacy director for the American Heart Association in Sacramento, said survivors such as Emily are crucial to the group's efforts.

"It is imperative that our volunteers share their personal stories with their legislators," Lara said. "Emily's story is touching. There are millions of Americans affected by heart disease and stroke, and when they are willing to take the stand like Emily, to meet with their legislator and share their stories, this is when change is made."

Block is looking ahead to next year and hopes for a chance to lobby in D.C. again.

"I definitely hope to go back," she said. "In the future, with more research, maybe someone like me wouldn't even have any strokes. Maybe they would see and know the warning signs right away."

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Emily Block (left, front row, seated) and the American Heart Association's California lobby group poses outside one of the U.S. Senate office buildings at the April "You're the Cure On the Hill" lobby event.

For more details about the American Heart Association's upcoming Heart Walk in San Luis Obispo County, visit [www.sloheartwalk.com/](http://www.sloheartwalk.com/).

For more on the American Heart Association, visit [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).

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