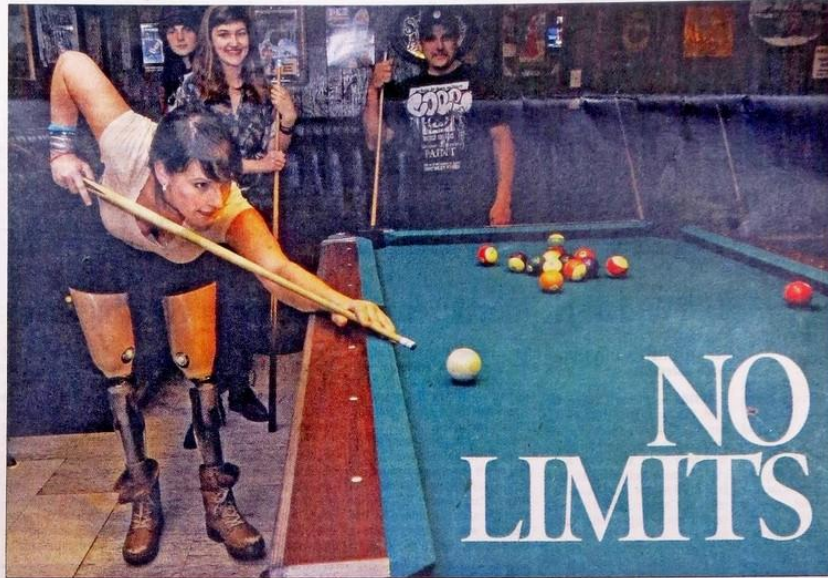


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Clara Gardner plays pool at Ye Ol' Watering Hole, a night spot on Pleasant Street in Northampton, Tuesday with friends and her brother, Nolan Gardner.

HOW A NORTHAMPTON WOMAN GOT BACK UP ON HER OWN TWO FEET

Story By LAURIE LOISEL | Staff Writer
Photos By CAROL LOLLIS

NORTHAMPTON

For 10 days over her college winter break, former Northampton High School student Clara Gardner, 21, traveled to Israel with one of her best friends, Rebecca Warren, to visit a mutual friend studying abroad.

With them, she navigated crowded Tel Aviv streets, jostled by the throngs of people. She shopped in teeming markets. She played pool, went to nightclubs, to the beach and spent an afternoon on a sailboat on the Mediterranean Sea.

Her life as a college student is being lived in many respects as it should be — four years after surgeons amputated both legs after she was hit by a drunken driver. One doctor said it was likely that she would never walk again.

Gardner takes great pride in the fact that she's been entirely out of her wheelchair since last April. Sure, she was exhausted from her trip to Israel, but more than that, she was thrilled. "It was probably the most walking that I've ever done, even with legs," she said. "It was miles and miles of walking."



Clara Gardner arrives for her appointment with prosthetist Thomas A. Mesick at the Hanger Clinic on Main Street in Springfield.

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Left, Mesick makes adjustments to Gardner's prosthetic legs. Right, Smith College students Sasha Hippard, 21, and Eleanor Cook, 22, play pool with Gardner at Ye Ol' Watering Hole on Pleasant Street in Northampton.

life-changing experience. "It's so meaningful to be at these camps," she said. "You get so much out of it in terms of supporting the kids and serving as a role model, but also you're working on your own thing, too." At that camp, her own thing was practicing walking down steep hills, which Cameron Clapp showed her how to do amid many falls and much laughter.

Another was climbing to the top of a climbing wall with her brother and others watching. "That was pretty awesome," said Nolan Gardner. "She was not willing to give up."

Since then, Gardner has been twice more to Camp No Limits, once in Maryland and once in Florida.

On Tuesday, Gardner drove herself to the Hanger Clinic in Springfield for her appointment with Mesick. Mesick was running a little late, and as he came out into the waiting room to greet Gardner, a man named Robert Blakeley of Springfield was with him.

Using a cane, Blakeley made his way slowly over to Gardner and told her he had watched from the window as she walked smoothly into the clinic from her car. He showed her his prosthetic leg and said, "I gotta get where you're at, go fishing and all that. I miss that."

Gardner told him she had just returned from Israel, where she went sailing in the Mediterranean. "So, it's possible," she said.

Inside the treatment room, Mesick carefully studied the places on her legs where the socket had chafed. Then he took them to a back room to modify the sockets so they would fit more snugly. As he worked, he talked about Gardner.

"She's off the chart," he said. "She's unbelievable. I've never seen anything like that, or been involved with a case of someone who is that determined."

He said he was amazed when she went to boot camp so early in their work together, and impressed that she was out of her wheelchair when she returned. He noted that it is much easier for young, healthy people to



Gardner exercises at the Hanger Clinic.

adjust to prosthetics. But her strongest suit, he said, is her fierce determination. "I've seen her frustrated a little bit, but nothing like, 'I'm going to quit,'" he said. "That word doesn't exist in her vocabulary."

He handled the legs with ease, making adjustments so the fit would be tighter. The work is part art, part engineering, part construction. When he was done, he studied his handiwork and said, "Sweet."

He picked up the legs, one under each arm, to head back to Gardner.

"That's a lot of equipment here, about 80 grand worth," he said. "Back in the room, Gardner hopped down off the chair to the floor, where she attached her legs."

Mesick said, with obvious fondness, "There's no can't with you."

O'Kane, Gardner's mom, said much of the treatment and expensive equipment has been covered by insurance, although sometimes the prosthetists have to "tangle" with the insurance company.

Boot camp was free, and the expenses associated with it —

travel, hotel rooms — were covered by a fund set up with fundraisers held in the months after the crash. The fund has paid for other essentials not covered by insurance — hand controls for her car (but not the car itself) and legs for rowing, for example. O'Kane said she has never tried to add up the total expenses related to her daughter's limb loss.

Looking back
Reflecting back to her years in a wheelchair, Gardner said she remembers that strangers frequently approached her to say she was an inspiration. These encounters made her feel uncomfortable at times.

"I'm not doing anything. 'I'm dealing with the life I got handed. The end.'"

These days, though, she feels she has done something people might find inspirational. Out and about on the new limbs, she continues to attract attention, and often praise.

"That's awesome," people might say upon seeing her at her full 5-foot-6-inch height. Or, "You're badass." Some people give her the thumbs-up sign, or even salute her.

These compliments she gladly accepts. "I don't want their pity," she said.

It wasn't easy getting back up on her feet. Being an above-knee double amputee is among the most devastating of limb losses. But she did it.

"I'm proud of that," Gardner said. "Now I have so many things going on that I am proud of."

Meanwhile, in January of 2009, the 20-year-old driver of the vehicle that hit her, Roberto Carasquillo Jr., was sentenced to three to five years in state prison and had his license suspended for two years.

Gardner's feelings about Carasquillo, out of prison now, are complicated. Sometimes she thinks she would like to meet him, but has made no attempt to make that happen.

"He was just a stupid kid," she said.

What angers her, she said, is the way society condones drunken driving. She questions why anyone who causes such a devastating accident should be allowed to drive again.

But mostly she's been focusing on living her life, learning to walk on two new legs, and finding meaning.

Living life
This semester Gardner is on leave from Smith College and taking classes at Greenfield Community College. She plans to go back to Smith in the fall and graduate next year with her class. She's considering a career in rehabilitation.

She is also planning another trip to boot camp. "There's always more to learn," she said.

In particular she will work on going up stairs and walking down stairs without using handrails. Mesick thinks she'll be teaching at boot camp this time around.

Nolan Gardner said he likes seeing how healthy and strong his sister is.

She has made it through this with her psyche perfectly intact," he said. "She is such an

For a Gazettenet video about Clara Gardner visit this story on Gazettenet.com

Camp No Limits serves a need

Camp No Limits was founded in 2004 in Maine by Mary Leighton, an occupational therapist who was working with a 2-year-old boy who lost two arms and a leg. It is a nonprofit organization with a mission of helping children with limb loss "discover happy, healthy, and independent lives," according to its website.

It has grown to offer eight camps in seven states around the country.

The camps are run with volunteer labor from physical and occupational therapists, doctors, nurses, prosthetists, adult amputees and family members of the campers.

There are plans to add more camp sessions this year, according to its website.

Clara Gardner of Northampton, who lost her legs following an accident in 2008, has volunteered at three sessions of Camp No Limits and is gearing up to go to another at a ski resort in Maine next month.

In the meantime, she has launched a fundraising effort for the organization, and invites donations.

"The best way to support me now is to support Camp No Limits," said Gardner.

To donate, visit Gardner's page at firstgiving.com. The firstgiving.com site will also lead visitors to a video about Camp No Limits.

—LAURIE LOISEL



Gardner and Mesick share a laugh as she tests out her prosthetic legs after Mesick completed his

Gardner discusses a problems she has been having with her prosthetics after her