

# Seeing path to success despite low vision



## ANGELINA GATT

Division Avenue High School

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**W**hen most people hear that Angelina Gatt has limited sight, they often do a double-take.

That's because the captain of the Division Avenue High School varsity cheerleading team regularly performs lifts, flips and routines alongside other members of the squad.

Gatt, 18, was born with Leber congenital amaurosis, a rare inherited eye disorder that affects about 3,000 people in the United States. As a child, she was considered legally blind, but she was able to regain part of her vision after undergoing experimental retinal gene therapy in 2013 at the University of Iowa. She was one of 40 people in the clinical trial.

About a year after receiving the treatment, Gatt said, her sight improved significantly, in particular her ability to see at night. Although her eyes are still sensitive to light and she lacks peripheral vision, Gatt is able to perform many of the same tasks as her peers, including competing in cheerleading and attending classes without the help of an aide.

In 2018, Gatt traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before a U.S. Food and Drug Administration advisory committee along with several other patients to advocate for the procedure she received. The treatment was later approved unanimously by the panel.

"I'm very grateful for everything that everyone has done for me, [from] my family to the doctors," she said. "It was so cool to speak for them and to help them out with all their work. I would not have been able to accomplish everything I have without my mom and my dad and everybody who put an effort into this [treatment]."

Gatt wasn't always a cheerleader. Before her surgery, she was an avid soccer player. It was a sport she could compete in, she said, because she could easily see the ball contrasted against the grass. After her vision improved, she said, cheerleading posed a challenge that she was eager to tackle.



## IF I RULED THE WORLD

**When I was younger, if I walked into something or couldn't see something, people laughed or gave a look. So I would try to stop everyone judging others because they need to focus more on themselves."**

"It was kind of more of a self-challenge," she said. "There are certain things that I can and will learn to do that will push me to become a better version of me. And while doing that, I'm helping out my team."

Gatt's low vision dashed her hopes of joining the Marines upon graduation, and she is still unable to drive. Nevertheless, her fallback position is optimism. "It's not the end of the world," she said. "There could be worse things that could be wrong with me."

In March, Gatt — who has also run such community events as summer camps and clinics as well as the school's annual Pink Out football game — received the Coach's Award for cheerleading.

Elizabeth Lynch, an English teacher at Wisdom Lane Elementary School who has coached Gatt throughout high school, said that in addition to her positivity and sense of humor, she is one of the hardest-working athletes she has ever coached.

"She's the kind of kid who never gives up," Lynch said. "She just never stops trying to improve herself."

**HIGHER ED:** Gatt will attend Nassau Community College. **FRESHMAN YEAR:** "I'm really excited about meeting new people and the different lifestyle."