

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# She was paralyzed by gun fire as a child in Dorchester. Now she's graduating from high school

By Laura Crimaldi  
2018

*When Kai Leigh Harriott was three-years-old, she was hit by a stray bullet and lost the ability to move from the chest down. In this informational text, Laura Crimaldi describes Harriott's life and character now as a young woman about to graduate high school. As you read, take notes on how Harriott responded to being shot and paralyzed.*

- [1] Even though she was just three years old, Kai Leigh Harriott can remember the night that left her paralyzed<sup>1</sup> from the chest down. She was on the porch of her family's Dorchester home singing "Barney" songs when the shots rang out. Harriott was struck in the back by a stray bullet, her spine shattered. An older sister carried her inside and laid her on the floor.

"I guess I was bleeding. I felt like I was floating. I was crying for mom," she recalled.

This week, Harriott, 18, will graduate from Newton Country Day School of the Sacred Heart. She is preparing to attend college outside of Boston, and leave the place where street violence upended her life, but that also summoned her determination not to be defined by it.

In a city where gun violence has killed young, innocent victims like Trina Persad, 10, Jermaine Goffigan, 9, and Darlene Tiffany Moore, 12, Harriott emerged as a symbol of hope and resiliency. Despite being seriously wounded, Harriott survived, publicly forgave her shooter, and thrived.

- [5] She has played a role in the growing anti-gun-violence movement — helping to lead a protest recently at her high school — but she also wants time to be a "typical teenager" and just spend time with her friends.

"My mom's kind of like, 'You have a voice, you need to use it.' I understand where she's coming from," she said. "I do have a platform to speak and I use it when I feel like I need to. I'm totally a kid of my generation."



*"March for Our Lives, Ukiah, California" by Bob Dass is licensed under CC BY 2.0*

1. partly or wholly unable to move

After she was shot in 2003, Harriott spent four months recovering at Franciscan Children's hospital in Brighton before enrolling at Chinatown's historic Josiah Quincy Elementary School and beginning her life anew in a wheelchair. At Josiah Quincy, she worked with physical and occupational therapists<sup>2</sup> and got her first exposure to Mandarin, which she still studies.

A few days before Easter in 2006, when she was 5 years old, Harriott skipped school picture day at Josiah Quincy to go to the sentencing of the man responsible for paralyzing her.

Anthony Warren, a convicted felon from Hyde Park, had fired three shots to scare two women on the first floor of Harriott's building after an argument. He had pleaded guilty and apologized to Harriott and her family.

[10] But it was Harriott's message to Warren that cemented her mark on the city.

"What you done to me was wrong," she said in court. "But I still forgive him."

Her sister, Kailana Harriott, 19, said Harriott didn't discuss her plan to forgive Warren in advance.

"It was such an experience to see her forgive. I don't think anyone was prepared for that," she said. "At the time, we didn't expect Kai to be that vocal... When she did that, it was her taking the initiative and leading us through."

Harriott said she visited Warren in prison during her sophomore year of high school.

[15] "I didn't have animosity<sup>3</sup> towards him," she said. "I just wanted to get to know him as a person."

Warren has since been freed, and Harriott says she is glad. Her mother, Tonya David, said she met with Warren shortly after his release from prison.

"I think that he's done the time and now it's time for him to live his life. Forgiveness is forgiveness," David said. "You have to forgive so that you can live your life, and I now stand by that. I just want him to succeed."

Harriott is planning to attend the University of Arizona. An aspiring veterinarian, Harriott said she'd like to study animal science and Mandarin.

"I just love animals," said Harriott, who has two pets, Bless, a cat who came to live with the family the same year Harriott was shot, and an 8-year-old cocker spaniel named Polo.

[20] She considers herself an activist and feminist who is proud to be black and is undeterred<sup>4</sup> by her disability.

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2. therapists who help people recover from physical or mental illness through performing activities required for daily life

3. **Animosity** (*noun*): hatred or loathing

4. **Undeterred** (*adjective*): continuing with something despite setbacks

"My family thinks I should do politics because I'm always arguing. I'm always talking about social justice," she said. "When I was [at Josiah Quincy] they used to say, 'You're going to run for president. You're going to be the first female president.' I thought about it. Maybe."

If Harriott wanted, she could put herself at the forefront of the youth-led anti-gun-violence movement that rose from the fatal shooting of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 14 by a former student.

Harriott said she's energized by the new wave of anti-gun-violence activism, but she also wants time to enjoy her teenage years.

In April, Harriott helped organize a walkout at Newton Country Day, a Catholic school for girls, as part of national protests marking the anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado, said Brittany Borders, assistant director of admissions.

- [25] Harriott spoke during the demonstration, telling the gathering that she's a living example of gun violence's toll.

"She was really vocal speaking about her experience," said Borders.

Harriott doesn't conceal the scar on her back from the gunshot wound or hesitate to discuss being shot, but her friends and family said the shooting and its aftermath don't define her. One of her closest friends, for example, said she knew Harriott for three years before she learned Harriott had been shot.

"We don't look at her as Kai in a wheelchair," said Ariana Gomes, 18, who has been Harriott's friend since middle school. "We look at her as Kai."

Kailana Harriott said her sister "goes beyond her chair."

- [30] "I think the greatest thing I've learned from Kai aside forgiveness is just the beauty of bouncing back," she said. "No matter what goes on in life, no matter what trouble she may face, she always is able to bounce back."

Kai Harriott said that resiliency has carried her since the day she forgave Warren.

"I felt like I was just beginning my life," she said. "I felt like there was nothing else from there to do but just live my life and that's what I did."

Before getting her high school diploma, Harriott returned to her Chinatown elementary school to complete her senior project. She spent a month volunteering at Josiah Quincy's after-school program as part of her study of after-school programs in low-income communities.

"It really means a lot to me to come back here," Harriott said last month as she waited at one of Josiah Quincy's playgrounds for class to get out.

- [35] Her former Josiah Quincy teachers said they were delighted to have the vivacious<sup>5</sup> teenager with dimples back at the school.

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5. **Vivacious** (*adjective*): full of animation and spirit; lively

"The smile hasn't changed. The beautiful eyes haven't changed," said Kelly Keefe, who taught Harriott in fourth grade. "It's amazing to see the young lady she's turned into. [It's] not something I'm surprised about," Keefe said. "She was always a fighter."

*"She was paralyzed by gunfire as a child in Dorchester. Now she's graduating from high school" by Laura Crimaldi from The Boston Globe.  
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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the central idea of the text?
  - A. After being shot and paralyzed, Harriott decided to fully commit herself to changing legislation around gun control.
  - B. Harriott considers her experience being shot and paralyzed as a defining moment in her life that continues to shape her today.
  - C. Harriott didn't allow her experiences of being shot or paralyzed hold her back from being the compassionate and driven individual that she is.
  - D. When Harriott forgave the man who shot and paralyzed her, she revealed children's capacity for compassion and forgiveness.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "My mom's kind of like, 'You have a voice, you need to use it.' I understand where she's coming from," she said." (Paragraph 6)
  - B. "At the time, we didn't expect Kai to be that vocal... When she did that, it was her taking the initiative and leading us through." (Paragraph 13)
  - C. "If Harriott wanted, she could put herself at the forefront of the youth-led anti-gun-violence movement that rose from the fatal shooting of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland..." (Paragraph 22)
  - D. "I felt like I was just beginning my life," she said. "I felt like there was nothing else from there to do but just live my life and that's what I did." (Paragraph 32)
  
3. PART A: How did Harriott's actions after being paralyzed impact others who knew her or of her story?
  - A. People were inspired by Harriott's strength and moved by her ability to forgive.
  - B. People were surprised that she was able to forgive someone who injured her so seriously.
  - C. People were angry for Harriott and all the obstacles that she was forced to face at such a young age.
  - D. People felt compelled to fight harder for laws that would protect children from gun violence.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Harriott spoke during the demonstration, telling the gathering that she's a living example of gun violence's toll." (Paragraph 25)
  - B. "We don't look at her as Kai in a wheelchair," said Ariana Gomes, 18, who has been Harriott's friend since middle school. "We look at her as Kai." (Paragraph 28)
  - C. "I think the greatest thing I've learned from Kai aside forgiveness is just the beauty of bouncing back," she said." (Paragraph 30)
  - D. "Her former Josiah Quincy teachers said they were delighted to have the vivacious teenager with dimples back at the school." (Paragraph 35)

5. How does the author's discussion of Harriott's relationship with the man who shot her contribute to the text?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.**

1. In the text, the author discusses how Harriott forgave the man who shot her and left her paralyzed. Why do you think Harriott chose to forgive him for this? Describe a time when you forgave someone for something that hurt or upset you.
2. Harriott's family describe her as being "beyond her chair." What do you think it takes to overcome something as difficult as losing the ability to move from the chest down? Describe a time when you overcame something that was incredibly difficult for your mind or body.
3. How is Harriott contributing to change by sharing her story with gun violence? How have students throughout the United States been working to change laws concerning guns?