

# Harvard Student to Graduate Four Years After Brain Cancer Diagnosis

Rachel Slater insists that the hardest part about going to Harvard was getting in — if you don't count her two bouts with brain cancer.

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Now scheduled to graduate in December 2021, she credits the support of her family and friends for helping her through that treatment and a 2019 recurrence, along with the team overseeing her cancer care less than five miles from Harvard's campus in the [Adolescent and Young Adult \(AYA\) Neuro-Oncology Program](#) at Dana-Farber.

"I feel so fortunate that Dana-Farber is just a 15-minute ride away," says Slater, who grew up in Ohio. "It was very challenging starting college so soon after my diagnosis, but knowing I have my care team close by has really put me and my family at ease."

## Forging a New Identity

A rugby player who was being recruited to play the sport in college, Slater was driving home one day in January 2017 when she suffered a seizure and veered off the road into a patch of trees. At the hospital scans revealed a mass in her brain, which a biopsy one week later confirmed was a slow-growing tumor.

"Doctors believed it had probably been growing for years, even though I had no prior symptoms," Slater explains. "Because it was still growing slowly, I had a decent amount of time to prepare for surgery."

This allowed the Slater family, based in Ohio, to explore different options. They chose the [Pediatric Brain Tumor Center at Dana-Farber/Boston Children's Cancer and Blood Disorders Center](#) due to its

access to world-class oncology expertise and technology.

Rachel traveled there for surgery in April 2017 — a successful procedure, but one that also presented a logistical dilemma.

“The doctors told me I would most likely lose movement on the right side of my body temporarily, and probably not be able to walk at my high school graduation,” Slater recalls. “I did miss my prom, and the entire rugby season, but I made it back in time to walk at graduation. That meant a lot.”

By this point Slater knew she would be heading back to Boston — and Harvard — in the fall. She also learned that contact sports like rugby were no longer safe for her to play. Determined to make the best of things, she arrived on campus early her freshman year and joined Harvard’s rugby team as a manager. She made friends, but initially had trouble relating to classmates.

“Coming to school that first year, just a couple months after surgery, I think my emotional capacity to handle things was diminished a bit,” says Slater. “I told my roommates about my cancer because I felt they needed to know in case I had another seizure. But they were the only ones. I didn’t want my tumor to become my entire identity.

### Interest and Insight

Slater’s roommates grew into close friends, with whom she came to confide each time she had another MRI to make sure her tumor was not growing back. When, late in her sophomore year, she learned it was growing back, they were there for her as well.

Eventually Slater was told she needed a second surgery to remove the new mass, and doctors allowed her to hold off having it until Thanksgiving of her junior year so she could enjoy most of the fall 2019 semester. By this point, because of her age and tumor type — one seen more often in adult patients — Slater had switched her treatment over to [Dana-Farber’s AYA Neuro Oncology Program](#). Drawing on the expertise of both adult and pediatric neuro-oncology teams, the AYA program specializes in treating physical, psychological, and emotional challenges normally faced by this age group.

“At her young age, Rachel demonstrated rare maturity and resilience as she underwent surgery for her tumor recurrence,” says [Kee Kiat \(Aaron\) Yeo, MD](#), who oversees Slater’s care with [David Reardon, MD](#), with whom he also directs the AYA program. “She also has deep interest in her medical care, and is keen to understand the tumor, treatment plan, and her prognosis. Rachel is bright, honest, and possesses great insight.”

“Rachel’s fortitude and ability to positively utilize her experience with this diagnosis are admirable and inspirational,” says Reardon, clinical director of the Center for Neuro-Oncology at Dana-Farber. “She is a remarkable individual.”

As her undergraduate years wind down, Slater is looking ahead to her future: She is majoring in government, and wants to pursue a career in health care reform. She helps teach government and

civics to fifth graders through one Harvard program, and mentors high schoolers with sickle cell anemia through another.

Her experiences have also helped shape her future goals.

“I attribute how well my cancer journey has gone to the fact I was lucky enough to have Boston Children’s and Dana-Farber available in my health care network,” Slater says. “This makes me feel very passionate about working in government to assure everyone has access to the best care possible, like I do.”

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