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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA NAOMI LEWKOWICZ



the **SQUIRREL** *Whisperer*

How an unlikely friendship with Penn State's squirrels put a student in the spotlight—and helped her manage her autism.

THE SUN WAS SHEDDING AFTERNOON RAYS ON

the faces of fans inside Beaver Stadium last September. Down on the field, the Nittany Lion mascot was rounding up a crew of campus celebrities—Mike the Mailman, Schreyer Honors College dean Christian Brady, men’s hockey coach Guy Gadowsky—for a skit during a commercial break in the first quarter. Among those big personalities was a 21-year-old student in jeans and a navy T-shirt. Her long, light-brown hair was pulled back low into a ponytail.

Until that Saturday, Mary Krupa, a senior English major, had never even been to a Penn State football game. But a performance in front of 95,000 fans didn’t faze her, because she’s been in the public eye since she was a freshman. She’s known on campus—and around the world—as “The Squirrel Whisperer” or “Squirrel Girl.” And despite her unassuming appearance, her story is the stuff that comic books are made of: a college kid whose superpower is to talk to Penn State squirrels.

When it was Krupa’s turn, the howling chorus of “Animals” by Maroon 5 blasted over the stadium speakers. She kept to script and jogged toward the Lion and cheerleaders, who were holding up a poster that read “Hang Out with the PSU Squirrels.” She did some quick improv with the Lion, and then jogged back to her spot in the end zone.

And the crowd roared.

THE SUMMER OF 2012 WASN’T an ideal time to be stepping onto the University Park campus. It was a big place overshadowed by something even bigger—Jerry Sandusky had just been convicted of 45 counts of sexual abuse. By the end of July, the Paterno statue would be removed from outside Beaver Stadium and the NCAA would impose unprecedented sanctions on the football program. For Krupa, and the rest of that new freshman class, this was the bittersweet beginning of their time at Penn State.

On her very first day of summer session, she was wandering along Old Main lawn when she saw a jar of peanut butter on the ground. Growing up in State College, she had heard that the Penn State squirrels were friendly, so she scooped some peanut butter on a stick just to see what would happen; within seconds, a squirrel approached and quickly ate it off the stick.



THE LONG ROAD

Getting a driver’s license is “not a very high priority” for Krupa, or for many with Asperger’s—sensory issues (i.e. pedestrians crossing at the last minute) can be scary to manage behind the wheel. Instead, she takes the bus to campus.



FURRY FOODIES

“They don’t find peanuts in the wild, but they also don’t find Hi-Way pizza in the wild,” says Mary about the ethics of feeding wild animals. “They are fat campus squirrels and they can afford to be picky.”

She continued to visit—and feed—her new furry friends every day for the rest of that summer. She started keeping a container of unsalted roasted peanuts in her backpack. Soon, she was able to identify some of the squirrels—“You can tell by the color of their fur, their general proportions, and some of them have different gaits,” she explains—and noticed there was a female grey squirrel who was particularly friendly.

Krupa named her Sneezzy.

“She let me put a little birthday hat on her head and take a picture,” says Krupa, who turned the image into a card for her grandmother. That got her thinking: “There was all this negativity going on around campus,” she says about the scandal. “I figured we needed something to

cheer people up.” She made more miniature hats and, in September, launched a Facebook page called “Sneezzy the Penn State Squirrel,” dedicated to dozens of photos of the well-dressed rodent: Sneezzy wearing a commencement cap. Sneezzy in a Steelers helmet. Sneezzy outfitted with an acorn beret. That’s when things went viral.

Sneezzy went from being featured on Mashable.com to the front page of a Taiwanese daily newspaper. Krupa was inked as “The Squirrel Whisperer” and the media attention piled up over the next few years—NPR, *The New York Daily News*, BuzzFeed, Reddit, the U.K.’s *Daily Mail*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *Squirrels in cute hats! A girl who summons squirrels!*

But Krupa was never in it for the publicity. As it turns out, being the subject of attention is what Krupa has struggled with her entire life.

“I JUST THOUGHT SHE was quirky,” says her mom, Sue Krupa, about Mary as a young child. And, at the time, there wasn’t a better explanation for why she preferred to play by herself or read medical handbooks instead of nursery rhymes. “She would always write, ‘The time never ends’ and draw a circle around it,” says Sue. “And she would say, ‘I have to put a circle around it, because time never ends.’” Things started to make more sense in second grade when Mary’s school diagnosed her with Asperger Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. “Up until that point I thought it was just her personality,” says Sue. “She’s a classic case, but back then nobody knew about it.”

The American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual didn’t place Asperger’s on the “autism spectrum” until 1994, the year Krupa was born. Which is to say that, for a long time, many with Asperger’s went untreated. In fact, Penn State researchers recently found that 97 percent of the increase in autism between 2000 and 2010 could be accounted for by “reclassification.”





TRADE SECRETS

Mary, who lives at home, makes most of the paper props herself. If she wants Sneezzy to hold something, she'll stick a little peanut butter to it.

"Asperger's is not a one-size-fits-all type of condition," says psychologist Dennis Heitzmann, director of Counseling and Psychological Services at Penn State. "There are as many variations as personalities." One of the most common conditions is a lack of communication and social skills, both verbal and nonverbal. Although many with Asperger's are highly intelligent, talking to other people can be very difficult. "It's not that we can't socialize," says Krupa. "It's just that we aren't born with that programming." As a result, many experience social anxiety and isolation; that's especially true for females, who make up only 10 percent of Asperger's diagnoses.

It was around fourth grade when Sue Krupa told her daughter she was autistic. "I told her that Asperger's is an explanation, but not an excuse," says Sue. In that spirit, they started practicing conversations at home: When it was time for Mary to listen, Sue held up a stop sign. They worked on making eye contact with each other. Year after year, Sue attended the National Autism Conference held at Penn State. Mary, who has an above-average IQ, read as much as she could about the syndrome.

High school was hard, and understandably so for a teenage girl who wasn't neurologically wired to socialize with peers, or care about clothes or makeup. "I'd always

eat lunch by myself, because I wanted to," Krupa says. "People would feel sorry for me, but that's what I liked to do." Her mentor through those years was **Bella Bregar '75 Edu**, a longtime autistic support teacher for State College High School. Sometimes Krupa would spend lunch in Bregar's classroom. "She'd watch the squirrels out the window," recalls Bregar. "That let her refocus. Then she could go on with the rest of her day."

PEOPLE FELL IN LOVE WITH the Penn State squirrels in the funny hats. And they fell in love with Krupa, too: Alumni from all over the world messaged her; some even ask to meet up with her and Sneezzy when they're in town. "[The visits] don't happen *that* frequently, which is good. Not because I'm busy, but because the squirrel is busy," says Krupa. "I can't guarantee that Sneezzy will be out."

On a textbook fall day at Penn State, I, too, am hoping to hang out with Sneezzy. Krupa suggested that we meet in the afternoon—"Squirrels like to sleep in," she explains—and I'm waiting for her on the steps of Old Main. I see her approaching at a steady pace, but then she abruptly stops about 10 yards away. Her gaze is now in the direction of one of the tallest elms on campus.

“There’s a squirrel,” she yells over to me.

A squirrel, stretched head-to-tail on one of the tree’s lower branches, is seemingly in the middle of a nap. There is impressive muscle memory in Krupa’s eyes: Dozens of squirrels are scurrying all around us, but she has a good hunch that, yes, *this* is Sneezzy.

“She’s always been very observant,” says Sue. “Everyone has their heads down in their phones and she would be noticing the ducks or bunnies on campus. That’s Mary.”

Krupa calls up to the squirrel with a clicking of her tongue—*tch, tch*—and waits. After a few seconds, she tries again—*tch, tch.... tch, tch*. This time, the squirrel perks its tiny head up. The whole scene feels comfortable, choreographed, as if they’ve done this dance a thousand times before. Even the students heading to class know the routine, as they stop and get their phones ready. “It’s like everybody seems to know her,” says her

mother. “I never would have thought that would happen in a million years.”

Sneezzy makes her way down the branch and pauses for a moment in a shallow knot. Simultaneously, Krupa kneels down near the tree with her small Tupperware container brimming with peanuts and acorns. Sneezzy scuttles down the last stretch of bark, hops onto the mulch, and marches right up to her side. The squirrel takes the peanut, but doesn’t run away with the treasure. Instead, it stays, and in a matter of moments, moves into Krupa’s lap. “Sometimes the tail hits me in the face and it’s wonderful,” Krupa says with a smile.

After Sneezzy eats, Krupa opens her thermos and spills some water into the palm of her hand. Sneezzy takes a drink. If there ever was any doubt, it’s for this reason—this indisputable connection—that Krupa knows this is, indeed, Sneezzy. “Squirrels are smart enough that they can

A BETTER FUTURE

Penn State alumni are teaming up to help people on the autism spectrum transition into adulthood—and society.

Despite the growing number of adults with autism in this country—each year, 500,000 people on the spectrum turn 18 years old—few universities excel at providing transition services for them. There are even fewer resources once college students graduate.

Aware of the problem, **Bella Bregar '75 Edu** founded the ACRES Project, or Adults Creating Residential and Employment Solutions. The nonprofit was born out of the need for a place where adults with autism could live, work, and socialize—at a pace that’s right for them. She’s been raising funds to build a residential and day community since 2014.

Architectural engineer **Adam Fernsler '97 Eng** joined the ACRES board last spring. Shortly after, he drew up



blueprints for a possible facility. And, in July, he and wife **Heather Kogelmann '01 H&HD** agreed in principle to purchase a house not far from campus. The two-acre lot with huge oak trees and a sprawling park next door is to be home to his new business, Action 4 Autism—a destination of resources for the autistic community, including a space for ACRES to

run its programs. (His father, architect **Frederick '65 A&A**, designed the home for The Second Mile 35 years ago.) The property will undergo major renovations and will feature private suites and bathrooms, a calming sensory garden, and greenhouses to be used for aquaponics, a method of farming in which students can grow and sell fish and organic vegetables.

Fernsler says there’s room for more development—including maybe an addition and duplex—but he wants to keep the living spaces open and inviting for residents to socialize on their own terms, whether it’s a movie or a cooking class. “We want to give them that little slice of dorm life,” says Bregar.

But the true value goes beyond the brick and mortar. Fernsler envisions every resident having individualized programming from fitness and nutrition plans to vocational training and applied behavior analyses. This could also be a chance to collaborate with university programs. Says Fernsler: “Our residents will lead full and meaningful lives.” For more information, visit action4autism.today and acresproject.org. —AD

recognize you, too,” she says. “You can go months without seeing them and they’ll still remember you.”

After half a dozen peanuts, and a full belly, Sneezy scampers back up the elm.

COLLEGE IS AN EXPERIENCE that’s grounded equally in independence and socialization, which is exactly why it can be such a difficult transition for people with autism. “They feel like visitors on a different planet and want naturalization,” says Stephanie Stama, a psychology postdoctoral fellow and counselor at CAPS. Leaving high school, where there’s usually plenty of academic and emotional support, for a big university—with all of the free rein that accompanies it—can be downright daunting.

“Because [Asperger’s] is a psychological condition, it’s not as simple as saying ‘I’m going to change it because I’m in a new situation,’” says Heitzmann, the CAPS director. “The condition follows you.” What’s more, college students have to really rely on their “executive functioning” skill—aka the brain’s ability to plan and prioritize, and multi-task the various assignments, projects, and deadlines every semester—and it’s this particular skill that doesn’t come naturally for those with Asperger’s. “Mary is very intelligent, but very not focused,” says Bregar, her high school mentor. “I was so concerned that when she got here to Penn State it would be so overwhelming.”

Which is why Penn State, like other universities around the country, is trying to find ways to help. But the students have to be willing to help themselves, too: In order to access any resources, they have to voluntarily disclose their condition to the student disability resources office.

Penn State offers some services, like extra time and alternative locations for taking tests. There’s also a weekly meeting, facilitated by CAPS, for students on the spectrum to work on interpersonal skills. And the housing office might be able to make accommodations, like a single bedroom. “When you come into a setting with literally no personal space—there’s two feet between beds—that’s a new experience for everyone, let alone anyone on the spectrum,” says Stama.

And, of course, students find other ways to cope with all of the change as well. “One thing that Asperger’s people like is, ‘OK, if I’m overwhelmed, where do I go?’” says Bregar, adding that Krupa could always catch her breath, so to speak, at the Old Main lawn. “[Feeding the squirrels] has been a calming thing for her. It’s her safety spot.”



AT HOME

Her autistic fixations, called perseverations, have waned, but Mary is still very interested in animals, especially birds.

KRUPA’S TIME AT PENN STATE is winding down. After switching majors from wildlife and fisheries science to English, she expects to graduate in December. In addition to discovering her skills—she’d love eventually to write for an environmental nonprofit—she shares that she is more comfortable communicating than she used to be, something that she credits to all of the interviews about Sneezy. “I *have* to talk to people. Gradually, with practice, it becomes easier,” she says.

Socializing with students has gotten easier, too, perhaps because of how often they stop her to take a selfie. She’s also “totally used to” making eye contact, which would have been awkward just a couple of years ago. And although she names only one friend at Penn State, one whom she sees “infrequently,” she’s active in several student groups, from The Wildlife Society to the Small and Exotic Animal Club. She also spends time volunteering at Penn State’s Shaver’s Creek Environmental Center, where she’s always happy to talk about birds.

Her mom adds that she’s noticed a confidence and a willingness to tackle “just about anything” since Krupa started at Penn State. Her executive functioning has improved drastically between juggling those interviews, starting a small “Sneezy calendar” business, and keeping up with the demands of a full-time student.

After she graduates, Squirrel Girl may long be remembered for best-friending the campus squirrels and making headlines around the world. But it’s Mary Krupa, and her personal transformation throughout college—and on the spectrum—that’s the real success story. ▀