Meet Caroline Combemale: Cyber Student, Teen Teacher and Lead Guitarist

By LARKIN PAGE-JACOBS

Fifteen-year-old Caroline Combemale teaches computer programming language Scratch during a recent session at Assemble Pittsburgh.

Credit Ryan Loew / 90.5 WESA

Caroline Combemale moves to her own rhythm. She has been shaped by a loving family, a tenacious personality and a hunger for new experiences. But her life has also been shaped by hardship.

The 15-year-old grew up in Belgium and often lapses into hushed French when she talks to her mother Laura. When they moved to Pittsburgh, where Laura is originally from, Combemale (pronounced Coom-beh-mel) was in grade school.

She is naturally outgoing and was surprised when her classmates began to bully her. It got so bad that Combemale and her parents decided a cyber charter school was a better option for her education.
She is flourishing under the flexibility of Agora Cyber Charter School which allows her to keep up with her traditional school peers while giving her the freedom to pursue other interests, of which she has many.

When she is not “in school” Combemale might be found teaching Scratch (http://scratch.mit.edu/), an introductory computer programming language, to other students at their schools or in community centers.

“It’s really great for kids who have no coding experience,” Combemale said. “I love teaching Scratch, it’s one of my favoritest things ever.”

She may be hanging out with her friends who she met through her online school, or she might be playing lead guitar with her garage band “Louder Than Traffic (https://www.facebook.com/LouderThanTraffic).” Right now they do covers, but they plan to write their own music.

“We’re pretty cool,” she said.

**Video:** Watch as a busy 15-year-old Caroline Combemale makes time for cyber school, Scratch classes and band practice. Story continues below.

Combemale also loves volunteering at Assemble Pittsburgh (http://assemblepgh.org/), an interactive arts and technology program located in Pittsburgh’s Garfield neighborhood. Combemale is on a debate team, and she formed a “Gay Straight Alliance” (GSA) group at her cyber charter school.

“A lot of kids go to cyber school because they were being bullied, and we don’t just focus on GSA issues, we focus on bullying and other types of discrimination,” Combemale said. “It’s really great because all these like-minded kids can come together in this group and talk about issues like racism or disability injustice.”

Part of Combemale’s experience is colored a physical health problem called Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. The chronic condition is characterized by severe pain in the joints and muscles.

“My whole body could be in pain at any moment,” Combemale said. “Whenever you start getting a lot of pains everywhere and it’s really uncomfortable and it just builds up on the stress because you can’t do whatever you’re stressed about because you have pain, and it just becomes a giant train wreck.”

Combemale explained that she was already an active, social person before her condition was diagnosed, but she said it may be factor in driving her to stay busy. The pain is always with her, so the distraction that comes with new and varied experiences is more than welcome.

“In a way it’s been positive,” she said. “I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, but in my case
I think that with everything that happened I was constantly searching for an escape and I finally found it.”

She said she’s undecided on what she wants to do when she grows up. Combemale calls computers her “first love,” but she also enjoys music ... and then she thinks she may want to go into business because she loves to travel and connect with people ... or perhaps she will go into medicine.

“I don’t actually know where I’m going to go,” she said. "I just know I’m going to go somewhere and do something I like.”