

[00:00:00] **Stephen Calabria:** From the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City, this is Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm your host, Stephen Calabria, Mount Sinai's Director of Podcasting.

[00:00:13] On this episode, we have a special edition of Road to Resilience featuring guest host Emma Guttmann. Dr. Guttmann is the Waldman Professor of Dermatology and Immunology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and Director of the Laboratory for Inflammatory Skin Diseases.

[00:00:28] Her major clinical focus areas are atopic dermatitis and eczema and alopecia areata.

[00:00:34] Because of her medical background, Dr. Guttmann was uniquely qualified to interview our guest, Armani Latimer. Ms. Latimer is a Texas based cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys who revealed recently she suffers from alopecia.

[00:00:47] Overcoming such a visible and challenging diagnosis would be formidable for most people, let alone someone working in such a public facing role. Ms. Latimer's strength and determination is a case study in toughness and resilience. We're honored to have Ms. Armani Latimer and Dr. Emma Guttmann on the show.

[00:01:06] **Dr. Emma Guttmann:** Hi, everyone. I'm so excited to be with you. I'm Emma Guttmann. I'm the chair of the Department of Dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. And I have a very special guest here to talk about our alopecia areata. I'm so excited that you are here with me. Welcome.

[00:01:23] **Armani Latimer:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:26] **Dr. Emma Guttmann:** Thank you so much. So first, let me ask you, you are a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, which is exciting. When did you start doing it and how did you get to it?

[00:01:36] **Armani Latimer:** So I am in my fifth season as a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, so almost five years I've been dancing for the Cowboys. I've been dancing since I was three years old but if you ask my parents, I've been dancing since I came out of the womb and so I've done competitive dancing pretty much all my life until I aged out. And then I danced in college for the university of South Carolina.

[00:02:00] And then when I graduated, that's when I decided to audition for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. I knew I wanted to keep dancing and it was kind of the perfect opportunity for me because it was COVID and they transitioned to virtual auditions. So it just kind of fell in my lap that it was the perfect opportunity for me to try out.

[00:02:20] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Amazing. It sounds exciting.

[00:02:22] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah, it is. I love what I do and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

[00:02:26] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** I know. No, this sounds amazing. Tell me a little bit about the alopecia. When did it happen and what was the progression and what did you feel when you were first diagnosed?

[00:02:40] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah. So I was first diagnosed when I was 12 years old. I came home from a family trip that we did over the summer and my mom was taking out some braids that I had in my hair.

[00:02:53] And she noticed that when she took out one of the braids that there was a spot right there and there was hair missing. And so she decided to take me to the dermatologist and that's when they officially diagnosed me with, alopecia areata.

[00:03:07] And, I kind of knew about alopecia because my dad has alopecia universalis, which means he doesn't have hair for people who don't know. And so I didn't really feel Any kind of way, really, when, when you're 12, you don't really grasp the, the importance of alopecia quite yet.

[00:03:28] And it was kind of just normalized in my household because my dad did have it. So I never really had any bad feelings toward alopecia because my dad just went about his day to day living through it.

[00:03:40] And then as I started getting older, I started to see more bald spots in my hair, but they would grow back pretty quickly up until, I would say, my end years of high school and then going into college, that's when I started to see more bald spots and it was taking longer for it to grow back.

[00:03:58] And then when I was in college, I decided to get different hairstyles to try and cover up, so extensions or wigs, just to try and help cover up those bald spots again. And then when I decided to try out for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders, I wanted to get rid of all of that.

[00:04:20] I really just wanted to rock my natural hair, and just see if I could make the team with my natural hair. But going through that process, it's very strenuous. It's very stressful. And there's a lot of hair maintenance that comes with that. And so I was noticing that my hair was falling out a lot quicker than I actually intended for it to, unfortunately.

[00:04:42] And then I decided to go back to wearing wigs just to try to preserve my hair. And then unfortunately I did end up losing all of my hair, about two years on the team, my second year. That was when I lost all of my hair and I have had a bald head ever since.

[00:05:02] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah, no, I'm sorry to hear that, but like we were chatting a little bit before we started the recording, luckily now I think, and we'll talk about it later because I want to leave the audience with some hope.

[00:05:14] We have what to do now and I'm very hopeful that actually in maybe 18 months we'll do a follow up. Can you tell people in your experience, what does alopecia do to you as a woman and in general as a human being?

[00:05:31] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah, I think, especially as a woman, there's so many societal standards as to what beauty looks like. So when you're going through a process where you're gonna have to change what your specific view of beauty is, it's a very big struggle on you mentally, and emotionally because we are so attached to our hair.

[00:05:55] And also when you're a young impressionable girl, you think all of these things, like my hair has to be perfect, my skin has to be perfect and so just going through that while also going through the big growing years at the same time, it was, it was a lot of stress and it was a lot emotionally for me, but I think going through that has made me the person that I am today as far as like, Being able to be very empathetic to people and what they go through on a day to day basis.

[00:06:25] Just because I know about my own personal struggles that I've gone through. Just a lot of mental and emotional stressors that come with losing your hair as a woman.

[00:06:36] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Definitely. No, I, I so much sympathize with that. And let me also ask, at the time when you started to lose hair, you were a child.

[00:06:44] How was it, sometimes kids can be cruel, they are not yet in college when people understand, but at that age, what was the reaction of the surrounding and what type of support you got from the surrounding, from the school, at home?

[00:06:59] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah, my support at home was amazing. My, like I said, my dad has alopecia.

[00:07:06] So he was a big support system as far as, you know. I asked him all the questions like when did your hair fall out? Did you even have hair to start with all of the basic questions that, you know, someone would ask?

[00:07:17] And then my mom was very supportive as far as helping me find different hairstyles that didn't affect the bald spots that I already had, but still allowed me to be creative with my hair when I wanted to be.

[00:07:28] So at home, I felt very free, very open about my alopecia. But when you get to school, like you said, kids can be, they can be cruel, they can be mean.

[00:07:37] And, there were conversations when I was little about, like if you could grow your hair, like if you couldn't grow your hair, you were this or you were that, and just hearing all of the things that kids would say, not even knowing what I was going through, it affected me in a way that I didn't even want to share.

[00:07:58] Because I didn't want their opinions of what was going on with me because they didn't understand fully. I didn't even understand fully. So, I think that's really why I kept it to myself when I was younger.

[00:08:11] And didn't really start opening up about it until I found a group of people that I felt safe and comfortable with sharing my journey with.

[00:08:20] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** And are you in some support groups of other people with alopecia? Like, I know the National Alopecia Areata Foundation has such groups. There are also regional groups. Are you participating in such groups?

[00:08:33] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah. So I just actually got involved with the National Alopecia Foundation. And I followed a lot of different groups here in the DFW area.

[00:08:42] Haven't had an opportunity to go and actually go to support groups. Because unfortunately my time on the team hasn't allowed a lot of extra time for me to, to go and immerse myself in that.

[00:08:54] But I've definitely been following these groups for a while and just seeing all of the love and support that comes with a community while also having my own has really helped me, throughout this journey.

[00:09:06] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah, definitely. I think part of the healing process is also to find a support group that allows you to be nurtured in that community.

[00:09:14] You and I chatted a little bit offline, but now we understand more and more, and that was not understood at all, actually, when you were diagnosed, that there are a lot of commonalities in pathways that cause eczema, asthma, and alopecia.

[00:09:29] When I asked you, you immediately said, Oh, I have both. So tell me a little bit about the allergic diseases you have, and when did they start as compared to when the alopecia started, and how is it working when one gets better and the other one gets worse. Tell me a little bit.

[00:09:44] And then another question, I wanted to ask if your dad also has both and other members of the family.

[00:09:52] **Armani Latimer:** Okay. Yeah. So I don't really remember when I got my asthma diagnosis, but I, I do think that I got my eczema diagnosis around the age, either within a couple of years either before or after I was diagnosed with alopecia.

[00:10:11] And so I've actually never thought about the connection between the three of them. My asthma was a lot worse when I was younger, before I really started to ramp up all of my extracurricular activities.

[00:10:27] I think, just like having all of that really helped me understand like breathing and going throughout that and I think just getting used to the ups and downs of my, asthma, but my eczema, I would typically see now that I think about it, I would typically see it start to flare up a little bit around the times that I was having bald spots as well.

[00:10:50] Especially in the, in the winter times, because that's when, you know, your skin naturally starts to get a little drier. And then if I was ever doing any

activities outside in the sun, that's when my eczema would flare up a lot because of, I guess it's almost like, it felt like a heat rash to me.

[00:11:06] But I would notice myself scratching and I'm like, Oh, well, that's actually my eczema. But I don't know if my dad has asthma or eczema, but I do know that both of my younger brothers have eczema.

[00:11:19] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** So now we understand, and you know, this is new knowledge from the last few years, that there is a lot of commonality between these.

[00:11:26] And actually my own research provided now new avenues of treatment for these patients. So you and I will chat after that. I'm now very committed to provide you also a solution.

[00:11:38] **Armani Latimer:** Oh, thank you. I appreciate that.

[00:11:42] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** But, let's go back and see once you got diagnosed and it was evolving rapidly, you were losing hair.

[00:11:49] What did you do to stop it? And at what point you said, I don't want, because at that point, probably they were not great medical solutions at that point. At what point you kind of gave up?

[00:12:01] **Armani Latimer:** So while I was going through it, I would get steroid injections and I would do topical treatments. I would do those pretty regularly, while I was going through elementary and high school.

[00:12:12] I didn't do them as often when I was in college, just because I wasn't near my home dermatologist, I was far away from home. So every time I would come back home, I would make sure I had an appointment to go back if I was having an episode of having my alopecia bald spots.

[00:12:27] And then I didn't do them for a while when I moved to Texas. And, when I noticed my flare ups happening again, that's what I was like, okay, probably need to find a dermatologist out here, start back up my treatment.

[00:12:42] And I would say I kind of just threw my hands up and just stopped everything when it kind of got to the point where I had maybe no more than a palm's worth of hair, like the front of my hair, the back of my head, like in the center of my head, when I was having so much surface area of no hair and it was just more painful for me to go to the dermatologist to get the steroid

injections and not see any progress from that than if I would just say, like, It's just going to do what it's going to do and hopefully it grows back, but if not, I'm just going to have to deal with it.

[00:13:22] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah. So I, I'll say something that I think will resonate with you. When we have one or two or three patches of hair loss, we can definitely do injections, but any areas we need to think about the systemic treatment and also what needs to let us think about it is that you had asthma, you had eczema, you had alopecia.

[00:13:41] So you have multiple things that not allow you cause you to have systemic inflammation. So we treat it systemically and we, we will do that.

[00:13:51] And, in alopecia, another thing that is important is to understand that it takes time to grow hair. Just to get to the surfaces, you know, it takes time, but I have to tell you, we have many, many, many people like you with no hair that we managed to grow full hair.

[00:14:07] Okay. And yeah, the brows and Generally we do not give up on any patient. And my experience is the vast majority will grow hair, particularly people like you, what is important in alopecia, not to wait too long.

[00:14:22] But you are still in the timeframe that we can make a difference. Because, and it's important for patients to know, it's important to go to the doctor sooner rather than later. You don't want to wait 10 years before there was no hairy growth, because then the chances to grow are in fewer, but that's not your case.

[00:14:42] So we will definitely talk after this is so yeah, we met, you see, it was meant to be.

[00:14:47] **Armani Latimer:** It was, it was. I'm so excited.

[00:14:49] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** I know, I know. No, we really, we feel it's a mission.

[00:14:54] You know, there is nothing more gratifying, I have to say, you know, I also am an expert in eczema and eczema, it's very gratifying to have patients stop the itch, but I have to say that nothing is more gratifying than to have a patient with no hair, suddenly growing hair.

[00:15:11] **Armani Latimer:** Oh, that's beautiful. I love that. And what was the, I know we discussed it offline, but what was the range again? Like how, how long?

[00:15:20] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** So, in eczema you see a, first of all, you also have eczema. So you will see the results quicker for eczema, but alopecia takes time. It takes at least, I would say 24 to 48 weeks to grow hair.

[00:15:34] Some people it happens sooner, but at some point you'll start seeing it starts by having white hairs, as you know, it starts with white hairs and then they have the normal color. But at some point we, we want to go for full scalp.

[00:15:52] No, and it will take time. The important thing is that we'll start on a treatment that is safe for you.

[00:15:57] And now we have new treatments that are very safe, which we didn't have in the past. In the past, we had only immune suppressants, but we have many, many new developments, some of them from my love, and we are very excited, actually. No, this is a big thing.

[00:16:13] **Armani Latimer:** It's very exciting. Yeah, so that is very exciting, like very exciting.

[00:16:18] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Now any question that you have for me?

[00:16:21] **Armani Latimer:** So typically with your alopecia Do you see that they were diagnosed with eczema around the same time, how does that normally work?

[00:16:33] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** It's very variable, but why did I ask you about the eczema? Because the treatments are different. The treatments of those that have eczema and asthma and or are very different than those that don't.

[00:16:45] So I'm very thoughtful about that. That's one, one thing, but I see all the range. I see people that had eczema since childhood. It was not well controlled. Usually alopecia will come when we have uncontrolled eczema and then basically you have inflammation in the body and then another autoimmune disease comes on top of it.

[00:17:06] **Armani Latimer:** Gotcha. Okay.

[00:17:07] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** That tells me that probably your asthma and eczema or maybe just the eczema alone were not controlled. So just controlling these two will be beneficial likely also for the alopecia. But we see all the range.

[00:17:20] We see also patients that actually had alopecia first and then got eczema later. So we see all of it. And I didn't ask you, but do you also have seasonal allergies?

[00:17:31] **Armani Latimer:** I have seasonal allergies.

[00:17:32] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** So you have the whole allergic spectrum. So, I'm really confident that we can make a big difference in your life.

[00:17:39] **Armani Latimer:** Okay, sounds great.

[00:17:41] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah, no, hair is very important right? To, to all of us. And I think it's our identity in a way or part, a large part of our identity. So, yeah.

[00:17:49] **Armani Latimer:** Very true.

[00:17:51] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah. Now, let me also ask you, if you needed to go back to the time when you got alopecia, what would you do differently?

[00:17:59] **Armani Latimer:** I honestly don't think that I would do anything differently just because if I did, then I wouldn't be at the point now where I'm able to help raise so much awareness about it. But if I had to pick, then I would say I would have been more up front about my journey to everyone sooner.

[00:18:18] But I think the impact that I have made throughout my journey now, looking back, I think even just the small steps along the way have helped. But yeah, if I had to choose, I just would have talked about it sooner and opened up about it sooner.

[00:18:32] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** No, I have to say, I'm really amazed at the awareness you are trying to get and, I think all of us, physicians and patients and pharma companies need to do it together. At the end of the day, we want a better future for patients with alopecia.

[00:18:49] A disease that, for many years, people thought, oh, it's just a cosmetic disease, but it's absolutely not, right? It can be devastating to young children that don't have the mechanisms to cope.

[00:18:59] Like, you were lucky a little bit because you had your dad that knew a bit about alopecia. But we are dealing with many families that they don't have those coping mechanisms.

[00:19:08] And it's hard. And in school, but even for adults, I see it's hard. It's a tough, situation for somebody to cope with, but the good news is that now we have treatments that we can offer patients and we have many, many patients and next year we'll invite you once a year, we do an alopecia symposium with patients.

[00:19:28] Next year we, I'm hoping to invite you, and patients share their journey. And it's amazing, we see patients, patient after patient, that did not have any hair and now they have hair.

[00:19:39] Which is amazing, and children. But it's definitely taking a toll from the patient, from the family. What message would you want to leave the public with? Like, what would you like them to think?

[00:19:53] **Armani Latimer:** I just want them to become more aware with alopecia. Because I think a lot of people don't know how many people it affects. And it affects everyone in a different capacity.

[00:20:06] So, it could be this person is only experiencing hair loss for a couple months and then they're completely fine for the rest of their life. Or it can be someone who's like me, who's gone through it their entire life.

[00:20:18] But just, if we continue to spread the knowledge about alopecia, it's not going to be something that people feel ashamed and feel like they have to keep from friends and family members and spouses.

[00:20:31] It's just going to become a normal conversation. And, unfortunately, sometimes when people see people embracing their alopecia and going outside without any hair, they just automatically assume that it's cancer and it's not.

[00:20:44] And I think that's really the most detrimental thing to people who do have alopecia. So yeah, the more that we continue to talk about it, the more knowledge that is out there, the more research that can be done about it, the more normal it comes, or it becomes to everyone.

[00:21:01] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Yeah, no, I completely loved what you said. I think it's important to embrace patients with alopecia, accept them for what they are. I've had patients, children that were not invited to parties because the parents thought that maybe this is infectious or cancer, even adults.

[00:21:16] And people at work were like, Oh, we want to support you.

[00:21:20] You probably are undergoing chemotherapy. I'm sure people get this but importantly now we are also getting to a very hopeful time when, which we have amazing treatments, grow hair and can maintain the hair.

[00:21:33] And this is the message I want to leave the public with now, and not only you have a supportive community and you can seek people like you, you can seek patient organizations, but you can also seek doctors like me that can help you get your hair back in a way that will be safe and support you along the way. I would love to partner with you on this.

[00:21:55] **Armani Latimer:** Oh, yeah, I would love to partner with you. I think it's absolutely incredible the work that you've done. And I know. For those who have grown their hair back, they're very appreciative of you. And I just wanted to thank you for all of the hard work that you've done in your field to help alopecia patients.

[00:22:10] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** Thank you so much. I do everything I do for patients like you.

[00:22:14] **Armani Latimer:** Thank you. Thank you. Well, we appreciate you. I'm pretty sure they've already told you, but I just wanted to echo anything that they feel. I love the fact that people are actually trying to gain a greater understanding and also help, but in a safe way, like you said, because there have been a lot of ways that have not been like safe and also just very painful. Steroid shots are not.

[00:22:38] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** It can't, it will come out if somebody was cold. People need to understand somebody that has all the scalp gone, the steroid shots will not bring it back.

[00:22:46] **Armani Latimer:** Yeah. Yeah. And so, and even if they only have one or two spots, getting a needle jumped into your head is not the most fun thing in the world and it's all just so we can grow our hair back. So I, I want to say again, how much the alopecia community appreciate people like you who've put in the time and the effort to help out.

[00:23:06] Yeah. Good. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:23:08] **Dr. Emma Guttman:** So nice to meet you.

[00:23:09] **Armani Latimer:** Nice to meet you.

[00:23:10] **Stephen Calabria:** Thanks again to Ms. Armani Latimer and Dr. Emma Gutmann for their time and incredible conversation.

[00:23:17] That's it for this episode of Road to Resilience. If you enjoyed it, please rate, review, and subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Want to get in touch with the show or suggest an idea for a future episode? Email us at podcasts at mountsinai. org.

[00:23:32] Road to Resilience is a production of the Mount Sinai Health System. It's produced by me, Stephen Calabria, and our executive producer, Lucia Lee. From all of us here at Mount Sinai, thanks for listening, and we'll catch you next time.

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