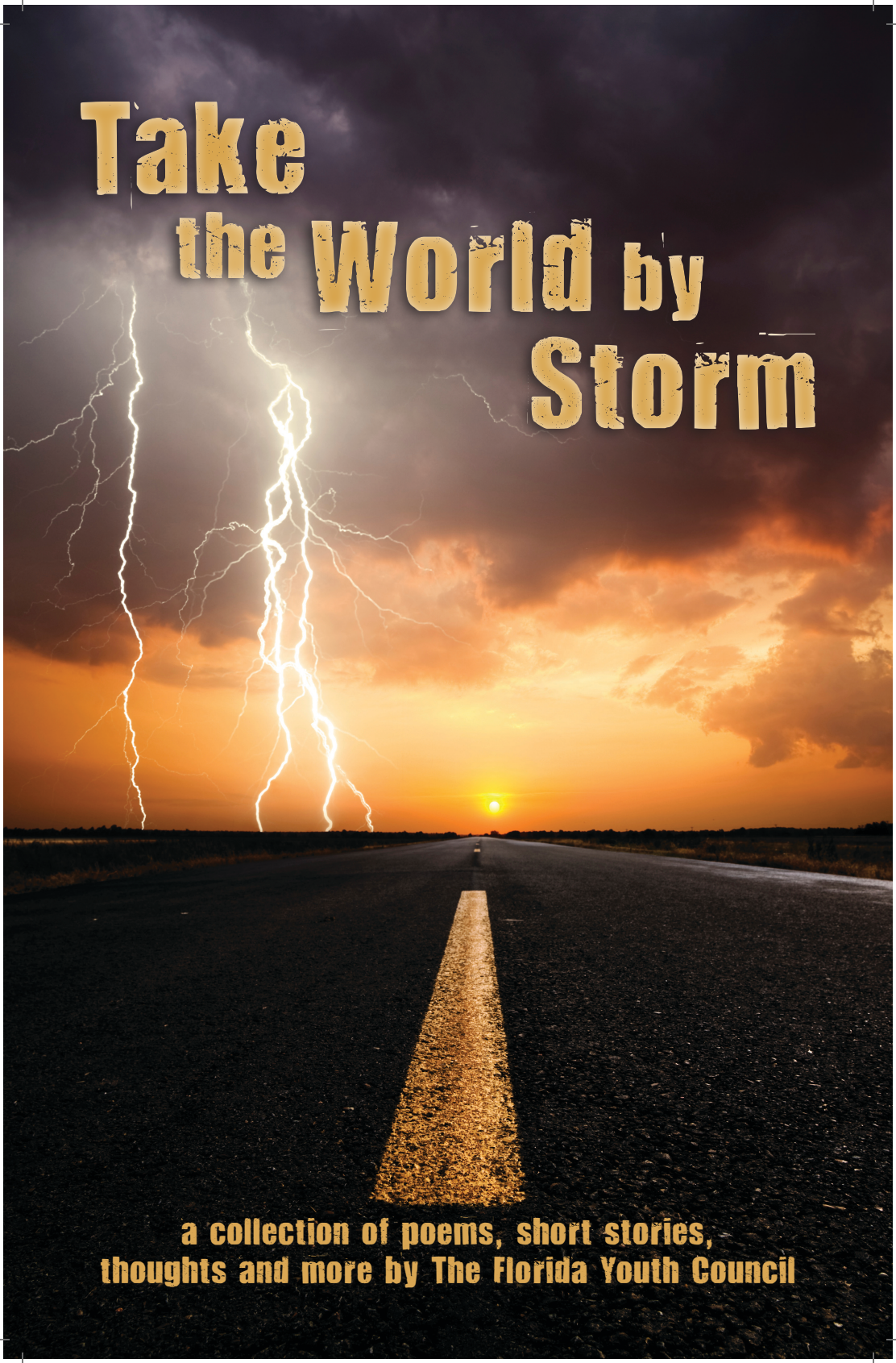

Take
the World by
Storm
a collection of poems, short stories,
thoughts and more by The Florida Youth Council

Introduction

Everyone has a story . . . a story of where they are going or where they have been. It could be filled with pain or filled with happiness. Someone's may be about the mundane things of life, or about saving the world. Regardless of the length, the content or even the nature of a person's story, everyone still has one to tell.

Youth with disabilities are no different. They all have a story that they want the world to know. Unfortunately, they are not always given a chance to tell their stories. This is partly because they often deal with the darker side of life. Youth with disabilities have to deal with the awkwardness that is youth, while also having to deal with the difficulties associated with having a disability. The results are sometimes funny, sometimes dark, and sometimes inspirational.

In an effort to give voice to the stories of youth with disabilities, The Florida Youth Council (FYC) has decided to compile their own tales into a book. The FYC is a group of youth and young adults with disabilities. What you are holding is the product of their efforts.

In the pages that follow you will be a given a personal and raw glimpse into the lives of members of the FYC. Several of the stories are inspirational, dealing with drawing strength from the darker side of life, such as having a disability or dealing with abusive people. These stories are counteracted by several funny stories about the lighter side of life, such as video games and concerts.

The FYC believes that there has to be a balance in life. We all need a little inspiration at times and other times we need a good laugh. The FYC hopes that you will find both with *Take The World By Storm: A Collection of Poems, Short Stories, Thoughts and More* By The Florida Youth Council.

The Florida Youth Council is a group of youth (age 13-17) and emerging leaders (age 18-30) with disabilities or special health care needs that live in Florida. Our council is funded through a grant from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities within the US Department of Health and Human Services, and our day to day activities are coordinated by The Family Café.

The FYC is all about getting youth and emerging leaders involved in self-advocacy, peer mentoring and other activities that will improve the quality of life for youth and emerging leaders with disabilities in Florida. The program provides a means for youth and emerging leaders to decide what issues are important to their generation, to express those issues in their state and local communities, and to develop strategies to solve them.

You can visit our website, www.floridayouthcouncil.com, or call us at (850) 224-4670 for additional information about the Florida Youth Council.

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Whitney Harris

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Cinthia Melgar

Christopher Regan

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Josue Tapia Ortiz

Sarah York

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The Happiest Day of My Life

Megan Atkinson

Imagine going through countless hours of physical therapy and trying to teach yourself to walk again after having foot reconstructive surgery. Well I don't have to imagine it because I was the girl going through it. Everyday I would wheel into that bright blue room thinking "Normal people have no idea what hard work this is. At least not until they have had three months of physical therapy." As I walked the poles (poles being cold metal rails that I would hold on to as I walked so I wouldn't hit the ground running), I felt weak holding myself up with my arms, but I had to keep going. I was not going to let my Cerebral Palsy get the best of me. Failure had never been an option for me, and never will be. I would often test my therapists and ask if I could sit down. The answer was always the same. The answer was no, and that's the way I liked it. They never gave me a chance to give up. Although I wanted to sometimes I knew I had one thing to look forward to: listening to the music of "Fall Out Boy." Everybody knew that Fall Out Boy got me pumped and ready to do anything. The sweet sound of Patrick Stump's voice would wash over me like a tidal wave, making me feel like I could take on the world. As the music pumped through the loud speaker of that nasty bright blue therapy room, I remembered thinking how great it would be to see them in concert.

On July 23, 2007, about 3 months after return home from physical therapy, I was sitting in my fire red bedroom listening to my iPod when my dad came in my room looking very serious. He laid what looked like a small piece of card stock on my bed. "What's that?" I asked, confused. "I don't know but I think it's yours," my dad replied. I grabbed the card to examine it. I soon realized it was a concert ticket, better yet it had Fall Out Boy written all over it. My wish came true! My dad surprised me with tickets to my first F.O.B. show. I thought to look at the date and time. The ticket said July 23, 2007 at 7:00pm. I felt hyperventilation coming on. "Oh my god Dad that's today!" I screamed happily. "Well get going. Its 1 o'clock now and we have to be on the road by 5 o'clock if you want to be there on time." He smiled. " Thank You, Thank You, Thank You" I said jumping up grabbing whatever black t-shirt I had, knowing I had a rather large selection to choose from, a cute but comfortable pair of jeans and of course my old black converse. Once I was dressed, I began to work on my hair and make up, pinning back my shoulder length dark brown hair so my triangular cut bangs were not in my face. As for my make up, it was the usual but with a little more eyeliner. I got ready right on time. My dad was busy disassembling my hot purple wheelchair as I went outside to get in our little red car. Everything was now packed and ready for the road. I couldn't shut up the whole way to the Ford Amphitheater in Tampa, Florida. Thoughts were running through my mind like "Will they see me were

I'm sitting?" and "What if I can't see them?" I also asked myself, "Does Pete Wentz (the bassist) look as good as he does in photos?" and "What does Patrick (the lead vocalist) sound like in person?" Oh my goodness! When are we going to get there? When my father and I finally arrived, I was so excited that I almost fell out of the car. My dad said "Whoa, slow down, stalker Pete's not going anywhere." I shrieked and replied "Ha-Ha Dad, very funny!"

As I wheeled toward the entrance everyone stared. Normally I would be thinking "Hello! Yes I use a wheelchair. Got a problem?" but I didn't care, not today. I had better things to worry about, like if I wasn't going to be able to talk tomorrow from screaming so much, and I was too pumped to worry about what other people thought. As we found our seats in the third section front row, a rap artist named Paul Wall was performing. Not only do I not like rap music but the so called music was so loud my pant legs vibrated. My father and I went to the concession stand to get some nachos and a funnel cake. I scanned through the crowd of people looking for a merchandise stand to purchase a T-shirt and noticed a sea of punk kids hovered around. I look up at my dad and said "Can I get a shirt dad? Please! Please!" "Yeah but we might want to wait a while, it looks pretty full right now" he replied. "But Dad, if we wait the shirt I want will be gone" I whined. My dad sighed and pushed me through the crowd. I peered over the table and handed money to the creepy salesman. Then said, "I would

like that one please" pointing to the green and black T-shirt which said (Fall-Out-Boy) in big black letters. The salesman nodded and handed me the T-shirt.

Back at our seats, the first artist on stage was Paul Wall. You may know him from the song Grillz by Nelly. He was featured in that song. If you ask me, hip-hop/rap is not my style. It was Paul Wall and +44 that made me cringe. +44 a was very hardcore metal band. I didn't want to be rude, so I stood to show respect. I thought this "punk" teenager with a Mohawk would pummel me if I didn't show a little bit of enthusiasm. But hey, don't judge a book by it's cover, right? That kid was probably the nicest person on earth. And them there was the Academy is… I had no idea what they sounded like much less who they were. They came on stage like balls of energy, jumping on tables and screaming. I later found out the lead singer damaged his knee pretty badly by jumping on one of those tables. My dad looked at me said "What are they, a bunch of girls?" I smiled and replied whatever Daddy. As I listened to the music, I realized they were good, really good. The song "Black Mamba" was my favorite. The beat and vocals were sick. As the Academy is… finished their last song, a wave of screams went through the amphitheater, half because they were amazing and half because Fall Out Boy was up next.

"Please give a warm welcome to Fall Out Boy!" the singer yelled as he ran off stage. Fireworks went off as Fall Out Boy appeared on the stage. I was beyond excited. I stood up from my wheelchair and shouted

"I love you!" As they played their first song, a few F bombs were thrown here and there like it was no big deal. After a few songs, I sang along too. Pete Wentz, the band's bassist, and Joe Trohmen, the band's guitarist, ran behind two lighted fogged glass doors and performed a strip tease. I turned to look at my dad who was just casually sitting there watching me make a fool of myself. "Oh my God!" I shrieked. My dad just smiled. All of the sudden both the band members were on a big dome in the middle of the crowd playing the song " Dance, Dance" while Patrick Stump, the lead singer and Andy Herley, the drummer of Fall Out Boy played on stage. Bands came and went. Finally, after two excruciating hours, I heard the sweet sounds of Fall Out Boy's "Thriller." I jumped up from my chair and began to scream. Everyone rushed to the guard rail and security made them move back to their seats, except for me. I was allowed to hold on to the rail for balance support. A security guard stood in front of me to make sure that I didn't do anything stupid, like jump the guard rail. Wouldn't that have been funny to see on the news? "Girl with Cerebral Palsy Jumps Rail at Fall Out Boy Concert and Makes a Run for the Stage."

As the night went on, I danced, screamed and threw the Fist of Rock in the air. But I doubt that my heroes saw or heard any of it. Just when I thought the show was over, Pete Wentz and Joe Trohman appeared on a dome above the crowd. Again, I screamed my heart out as they played their last song, "Saturday."

On the way home, I could hardly keep my eyes open. I wondered how a band that helped me so much could not even know I exist. I probably will never know, but I do know that was the best night of my life. I felt a part of something, no matter how small that something was.

The Greatest Day of my Life: Becoming a Christian

Lizzy Barrows

One day while I was in middle school I went to church with my best friend. My best friend was a girl named Michelle. I didn't exactly meet her at school; we met by chance at a concert at the Barbara B Mann Performing Arts Hall. We were watching a classical performance, and Michelle was sitting next to me, and apparently I fell asleep! I tend to do this when I'm in a dark, cool room and beautiful music is surrounding me. Michelle kept nudging me and saying "Stay awake and pay attention because the teacher might see you!" I realized she was just trying to help me so the teacher wouldn't think I wasn't paying attention. After the performance Michelle and I started talking and found out we had things in common. Falling asleep was not one of them. We both had a love for music, and she introduced me to Christian Rock. We both played in the school orchestra. I played the viola and she played the violin. She knew I didn't have a regular Church that I went to, so she invited me to her Church.

Michelle kept inviting me to Church with her but I wasn't sure if I really wanted to go. Michele was persistent, and kept asking me, knowing one day I would say yes and go to church with her. She could tell I was becoming more interested in Jesus, and I asked her a lot of questions. I was drawn to her for some reason,

and I guess it was because she would be the one to lead me to Christ. She was there when I began my walk with Him. One time when she asked me, it kind of felt right, so I went with her. Since I hadn't been to Church in such a long time, I was not sure what to expect. I did not have many positive experiences in the past at Churches so I was skeptical as to what my experience would be. I decided to be open minded because I was ready to experience the Lord coming into my heart. While they were worshipping my friend spoke tongues over me and I felt warmth come over me like I was sheltered. I was not afraid, although I had never had tongues spoken over me before. This was a totally new experience for me, but somehow I felt surrounded by favor in grace and I knew this was going to be a good day. Then they asked me if I wanted to accept Jesus as my personal Savior and I said yes. And that was the beginning of the happiest day in my life. I felt confident in knowing that I will go to heaven when I die and not hell. This experience was so new and actually exciting. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my mom and my family what had happened to me.

Because this was such a new experience I didn't know how my family would react. My mom and dad were brought up in Catholic Church but they hadn't been to Church in a couple of years. I wasn't sure how I was going to tell them about my experience with people talking in tongues over me and me accepting Jesus as my personal Savior. I did not want them to think that I was involved with some crazy youth group or a cult. I knew my mom would be understanding but my dad

would freak out. I wanted to tell them in a way that they would understand that would allow me to return to church with Michelle. I knew this was not going to be easy, but I was okay with that, because today had been my best day and I did not regret anything that had happened. I knew I made the right decision, and that's all that mattered. I knew my family would be supportive.

Before that day I got saved, I was not really in to church and didn't really read my Bible daily. We didn't have a home church. My family didn't make church a priority. When I was a little kid we used to go to Catholic Church but it didn't mean anything to me because I didn't understand it .My friend Michelle really helped me find my way back when we were best friends in middle school. I had a bad outlook on life. My parents and I fought every now and then. I wasn't close to my brothers and I hated to talk to my dad. When I explained to my parents what had happened my mom reacted with happiness for me and my dad didn't say anything at all. I knew that meant that he didn't understand or accept what happened to me that day. I think my dad was afraid of me becoming a strong person through Christianity. I didn't let my dad's negative reaction get to me. I think he had a fear of the unknown. I think he was worried I might try and convert him. I think he thought I was brainwashed or something. It wasn't brain washing, it was accepting Christ and opening my heart. I knew something powerful happened to me that day, and by Jesus becoming my personal Savior, I knew I could be strong and make it through anything.

As I read more into the Bible I thought a lot about my relationship with my brothers. It really isn't anybody's fault that we didn't get along, but I think they just didn't understand that I was different. With having a disability, sometimes it's hard for other people, even family, to fully understand. I think they were just afraid of the unknown with my disability. Reading the Bible and hanging out with Christians at youth group made me understand and appreciate peoples' differences. I continued to pray for my brothers and asked God's favor on them.

I have a lot to be thankful for since the day I went to Church with Michelle and accepted Jesus. After that day I felt more content with my outlook on life. I loved spending time in my Bible soaking up God's word. My relationship with my brothers grew fonder. Michelle and I still remain friends. We went to different high schools, but we talked every week. After graduation, Michelle got married and moved away. We still talk through email and phone. We still share our love for Jesus and I am thankful that she brought me back to Jesus. My mom wanted to go to Church and we found a Church at the movie theater. I started going to that Church with my mom and we are still part of it.

Now I go to Next Level church in Fort Myers, Florida. It is a non-denominational church. I love my church family. I call church my family because it's like I can be open with them. I serve in my youth group on Wednesday nights and some Sundays. Pastor Matt is hilarious. He has ADHD, which means he would be

telling us about something that is biblical and jumps to another story. He makes learning the Bible fun and breaks it down so we can understand what it was like back in the days with Jesus. We do a series of lessons, and always can't wait to go back the next week for more. This church also makes me more community-minded. We participate in events like food drives, clothing drives, street preaching, outreach, and it's all fun! My youth group is called Collide and it stands for "when life and truth collide." It's for middle school and high school and college youth. Now it's my turn to bring somebody else to Christ! I recently brought my niece, Vanessa, who is 14. She was new to the whole church thing and now she is a follower of Christ and I hope it was her best day also. My youth pastor is great also; he makes learning the bible fun and interesting.

I also thanked my friend for leading me to Christ. Now she and I are close friends even though she lives in St. Petersburg. We call each other once in a while. I just wouldn't have thought I would get saved that way. That really shows you what God can do in his ways.

Just an update on Michelle and her mom. Her mom passed away from cancer on Mother's Day, May 9, 2010. She was sick for only a short period before being called home to the Lord. I will always be grateful to Michelle and her mom for being so kind and patient and helping me start my walk with Christ. R.I.P., Dolores Henderson.

The Lab Gang

Matthew Boselli

Imagine having three big dogs and associating them with ice cream flavors. My three Labrador retrievers were known as Chocolate, Vanilla and Strawberry, just like the ice cream flavors. The names were given to them one day by our neighbors' young daughter as we were walking by her house. This comparison to ice cream flavors stuck with them. Even today, we still laugh whenever we come across Neapolitan ice cream at the grocery store. The name reminds us of "kids say the funniest things." My dogs real names are Pilar, Zack and Bailey.

Labradors are used today in various ways in communities as well as in homes. They are companion animals for the blind, disabled and chronically ill. The dogs are used in law enforcement to sniff out drugs and also used to rescue people who are missing from natural disasters. They have a keen sense of smell and a kind easy going nature. This unique dog was bred from the St. Johns' Newfoundland water dog and the Labrador retriever from Labrador, where the name originally came from. People used them to retrieve water fowl and also to save people from drowning. They are considered working dogs and also fall into the class of sporting dogs today.

Pilar was my first beautiful black female Lab. Her name is Latin American in origin, meaning "pillar of life" and it fit her personality perfectly. Pilar was

strong willed and lived life to the fullest. She also loved the outdoors, like most Labs, and loved to play with children. When she was a puppy and I was a youngster, my friends and I would play monkey in the middle with her in our swimming pool. We would toss the ball in the water – she would swim back and forth trying to catch it. Her relentless drive to play and retrieve the ball was amazing. She never got tired of swimming back and forth and she just loved it. Pilar liked playing in the water, and though it might have seemed forever, in reality it was only a short time. She also was a prankster. I had a friend that she did not like very much – she would drag his clothes around the pool deck in a teasing way. She knew she did something devious and eventually dropped them in the water. My friend would say" what are you doing you little devil?" Pilar especially loved to do this with my friends sneakers – don't ask me why, but this was her favorite trick. She did some really silly things. One evening while my family was eating dinner, my Dad went to get something and left his dinner unattended. Pilar decided to steal my Dad's piece of chicken right off of his plate. "Yum, this looks good" she thought – what a dog – she surely had a mind of her own and lived up to her personality.

Pilar had a friend who lived down the street named Coby – also a Labrador who was a Yellow male twice her size. Coby was an English breed – a stocky dog with a blocky head. He was a bit different than the American breed which has a smaller head and pointed snout. We call this breed of Lab a Field Lab, which Pilar was. Pilar

used to play hide and seek in both of our backyards. The dogs would wrestle with each other and Coby would let her win, being an English gentleman that he was. He just let her get away with enough and then would show her who was boss by holding her firmly with his paws, as if to say, "Okay, you win, game over". They also swam together and retrieved tennis balls in the water and became best friends, but we moved away and it was time to get another playmate for Pilar. It turned into two playmates by choice. Unfortunately, Pilar passed away at the age of thirteen and we lost our alpha-dog, the leader of the pack. I still miss her to this very day and will remember her for the silly antics that she played and her kind nature.

One day, when I was around 12 years old. my Mom met me at my school bus stop and surprised me with a yellow male Labrador. I was excited to see that we got a puppy and a new playmate. We named him Zack. The name Zack is Hebrew in origin, meaning "God remembers," and remember he does. He reminds me to wake up almost every morning by banging into my bedroom door to say "Hi, it's time to get up now, let's get moving Matt." I cannot be upset with Zack for doing this. In fact, Zack did all sorts of bizarre things to make us smile – for example, he would jump up and down like a pogo stick, crash into our picnic table and bump his head and just look around as if nothing had happened. This dog should have been named bumper. That would have been a perfect name for him. Zack would tumble over for no reason at all. We would just

laugh and he would wag his tail with excitement for the attention he was getting. What a clown!

One day when Zack was around 2 years old, I let him outside, waited for 15 minutes, then called him in. He didn't come, so I proceeded out the door to look for that furry fluff ball. I noticed he was on the other side of the fence, but why was he there? I said to him, "How did you get out there?" I realized then that he jumped over the fence and there was a duck that he was chasing. He was pacing back and forth to get back inside the fence. He did not realize he actually could once again jump over the fence to get back in. Zack was a very energetic dog with a lot of curiosity. That's what a real Lab is all about. They are duck retrieving dogs by nature. This was Zack's moment to show-off his true Lab traits and abilities. I wish we could do more of this together.

To my sadness, I noticed Zack has been slowing down. I do not know where the years went, but now he is fourteen. Time just flew by and the aging process is taking its toll. His spine is giving him a little trouble, so now he does not get the message to his rear legs as well as he used to. His joints are stiff with age. It is clear: time has caught up with him. My family and I love that fluffy little guy even more so. When I go over to him and give him a hug, he gives me the comfort that I need sometimes and reassurance when I am having a bad day. I shed a tear every time I think of the inevitable and the future without him. I have dreams about that dude all the time, I love him so much, and as I write

this I am shedding a tear; that's because I really know that the end is near. I don't want to think about that too much for it makes me very sad and lonely. Zack is one of those dogs that you cannot love too much. Zack has a way about him that you cannot overlook – his devotion and loyalty to ones' family is proven everyday you are with him. His personality and his willingness to please us will never subside. The thought of him brings on those familiar goose bumps and a warm fuzzy feeling inside my body. If anyone has ever loved a pet the way I do, they will know the feeling that I have for this wonderful devoted dog who I call Yoshie as my pet name for him.

In the movie "Marley and Me," which is about a Yellow Lab named "Marley," it explains how a family copes with all the mishaps, love, and sadness a young family goes through and how they all get to know and truly love this breed of dog. The family manages to live with a Labrador Retriever, or should I say how the Lab manages to live with a young family, with all of the happiness and sadness this brings to them. It is truly a good movie to see if you are thinking of getting a Lab.

A male chocolate Lab named Bailey – English in origin meaning "to safeguard property" – was my third dog. He was quite large in size for a Lab, which surely fit his name, because whenever someone came to our front door, they would think twice about entering. Bailey was so large in stature that we used to call him a stretch limo. He was long and tall with lanky legs. He

had a very kind way about him from head to toe, so opposite from his appearance. His personality was so loveable. All you wanted to do was hug him and all he wanted to do was to show you how much he loved you. What I liked about Bailey, was when we were sitting on the couch watching TV, he used to come over and put his backside on the sofa and sit and watch TV with you. His favorite show was Animal Planet, of course. I knew what he was thinking – "Put on the dog show dude so we can have some fun!"

I used to put his leash on and off we would go for a nice long walk. Bailey had very keen eyes which were sharp like knives and gold in color. I would say "Look up," and he would put his head up to the sky and point up with his nose in the air and observe all the squirrels and birds moving on the power lines. He did this with one paw up in the air. I thought that was remarkable of him. How did he know that? I guess it was part of his nature and he understood what I was telling him. Some people say that dogs are not too smart, well, this one was very smart. You could say, Bailey knew what you were thinking before you were going to tell him to do something. Bailey was more of a hunting dog rather than a retriever. That was the reason for his pointing; it was just in him being a sporting dog. Bailey also used his paws like he was trying to tell you something. That, to me, meant he wanted to play. I took him outside and threw a ball and we played fetch for a while – but like I said before, he was not much of a retriever. He did not bring the ball back to you, which was okay at

the time. Unfortunately, Bailey was not a healthy dog. He had health problems and passed away at the young age of ten, much too soon, which broke my heart. I will always remember him dearly!

Back to Zack who is 14 years old now and still with us. We spend time at the park with a few of his Labrador rescue friends. I notice that when he goes for a car ride he perks up considerably because he knows where he is going. "I am going to the park. Yippee!" head out the window and ears to the sky. "I'm going to take a long stroll down memory lane like I used to do when I was a puppy." I like taking Zack to the park because it makes me feel like a kid again. I know that he isn't just sitting at home doing nothing; he is getting exercise and enjoyment. This will keep him young at heart, nimble and free spirited. When I have a place of my own one day, I hope to get a yellow Lab and name him Yoshie, which is my pet name for Zack.

To have a Labrador retriever as a pet is to love a Lab – unconditionally. Love is what you will get back all the time no matter what the day may bring. This inspired me to become a volunteer with Labrador Retriever Rescue of Florida. My Mom and I volunteer whenever we can and on week-ends when I am off from work. We make home visits to prospective adoptee families, after an application and deposit is submitted to our coordinator. It is screened and accepted and a dog is on their way to a new "forever home." I also do "meet and greet" at neighborhood Petsmarts where we walk and socialize the dogs and teach them behavioral tactics.

The Labrador Retriever Rescue Group of Florida is an all volunteer group throughout Florida saving one Lab at a time. They are a non-profit organization with wonderful dedicated people and a whole lot of Labs who need forever homes. The dogs come from a wide variety of sources, such as shelters, abandoned and abused homes or owner surrenders. All the donations they receive from generous people and businesses are put to excellent use for veterinarian care, transportation and food. The Labrador Rescue Group has many events throughout the year which have proven very successful. In my area alone, our coordinator has adopted out 630 dogs and counting. The volunteer list keeps growing and growing because these dogs prove to be such wonderful pets and are so devoted and thankful to their new families and for the loving care they receive, that the volunteers know that their time is spent wisely and for a good cause.

My Mom and I are proud to be a part of this great group and will continue to help in any way we can, and educate the public about how important it is to spay and neuter your pets and always take good care of them. They will love you unconditionally. Your life will never be the same. People and dogs just go together, and when there is love to give, a Lab will always be there to receive it and give it back. These wonderful and devoted dogs are used as service companions for people in hospitals and nursing homes where they bring joy and laughter to both young and elderly ill patients. The patients wait at the doors for these dogs

to come in day after day with a wagging tail. The dogs get treats and the patients get smiles. Dogs do a lot for us and we should reward them in any way we can. I strive to make my life better and more fulfilling and with a dog like Zack, you can. We make a great team in so many ways and it will be very hard for me to be without him.

What happens when you close your eyes?

Alex Brown

Do you see…
You and your grandmother,
Who died a year ago,
Making cookies

Do you taste…
The burnt cookies
That your four year old
And his father made

Do you hear…
The sound of your
Youngest child
Laughing until she cries

Do you smell…
That new car smell
Of your first car
When you turned sixteen

Do you feel…
The strength of your dad's hand
As he picked you up
When you were little

What happens when you close your eyes?

That is when I wonder...

Alex Brown

It is when I stop
When I am alone
When I see other people together
That is when it hurts the most

It is when I think about someone else
When a girl laughs at my joke
When the cashier smiles extra big
That's when it feels like the day after you left

It is when I feel like I am making progress
When I go days without thinking of you
When I have a good time at a party
That I am unable to get up and move

That is when I wonder…

Dreams

Alex Brown

I lay my head down
Trying to get it straight;
Where I've been
Where I'm going
Unable to define
This life I'm living

I'm walking in the sky
The ground above me
Trees are growing sideways
With leaves that are on fire
Casting deep shadows
In the current reality

Like a raging ocean
My dreams continue on and on
Dictated only by the tides
Flooding the lens
Through which I see
This world

Falling Raindrop

Alex Brown

Imagine what it would be like to be a raindrop
You and all your buddies' just chilling
In the clouds as an ice droplet
Then the floor drops out and you fall
As you fall, you feel yourself coming apart
And the next thing you know
You are all liquid, no longer hard
But that is the least of your problems
As you continue your free fall you pick up speed
Trying to brace for the eventual impact
Panicking away the last moments of your life
Careening into a car's windshield
Only to have your left over parts swept to the side
Along with all of your buddies
What a ride that would be

Frozen in Place by Fear

Alex Brown

We are frozen in place
We are afraid
Afraid to live
Afraid to die
Our fears capture us
Slowing down responses
Striping away our ability to move
Taking away our ability to
Fly away like the birds
Fear keeps us in place
Unable to move
Unable to think

Guitar is my Life

Mason Charles

At my thirteenth birthday party, an older friend of mine named Dylan stopped by to wish me well. Dylan is in his late twenties now, and has always been a role model to me. I knew him through my church at the time; he played guitar and sang at the youth services on Wednesday nights. I loved his demeanor and personality. Dylan is one of the easiest guys to get along with that I have ever known, and his passion for Jesus makes him a shining example of how a Christian should act at all times. I have always loved music, and seeing my friend Dylan up on the stage playing his guitar and singing at the top of his lungs really inspired me to perform.

I had already expressed my interest to my mom, and at the party she surprised me with my first guitar, a blue acoustic that she found for a good price at a local music store. Then Dylan arrived to celebrate and give me my first guitar lesson. I was so eager to learn the first few basic chords he wanted to teach me. My fingers hurt really badly for the first few weeks, but all I could think about was how great it would be to someday play like the people I admired, so I pushed through it. The first few weeks were really tough. There were several times that I called Dylan late at night, panicking because the guitar had gone out of tune and I hadn't yet figured out how to fix it. I had to deal with

a lot of frustration when my fingers wouldn't move in the ways that I needed them to. Although I was able to learn pretty quickly, I spent a lot of time trying to get the right combination of what I saw on paper and what I was actually playing. It was difficult to remember which fingering positions on the fret board gave me a certain chord or note. I spent hours figuring out and then playing a very simplified version of "Smoke on the Water." This first learning period is when most people give up, thinking that they will never be able to overcome their struggles, or that they just "don't have enough talent" to continue. Others make excuses saying that they underestimated the amount of work it would be or that they don't have enough time for such a hobby. I was able to persevere by simply keeping my mind in the future, thinking about the time when I would be able to play difficult songs flawlessly.

It was about this time that I began really getting into music that was driven by riffs and lead guitar solos. Church songs were okay, but once I mastered a few basic chord progressions, I was hungry for something that sounded more complex. A friend of mine turned me on to some hard rock bands from the past, and I started listening to Guns N' Roses, AC/DC, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin and Metallica. Hearing the up-tempo overdriven rhythms and screaming bluesy leads turned on something inside of me immediately. I decided that my life would not be fulfilled until I could shred right along with Slash and Jimmy Page. I told my mom that I was ready to trade in the acoustic guitar for an electric,

so she purchased a replica Fender Stratocaster called a "Squier." It was a beautiful shade of blue, and it came in a beginner's pack with a method book, a quarter-inch cable, a nylon strap and a small practice amplifier. As soon as I plugged it in for the first time, I knew that I was ready to begin touring the world with a band immediately. However, my new guitar teacher, Shane Gibson, convinced me that I should probably learn to play guitar before I packed mine up and hit the road.

To this day I have yet to find someone that is as good at guitar as Shane. He had graduated from Berklee College of Music in Boston and was home in Fort Walton Beach just long enough to find a job elsewhere. He was teaching at a local music store for money in the mean time, and word had already gotten around how amazing he was, as he had a full booking of students. Shane is a funny looking little dude who always manages to find a hair style crazy enough to match his personality. But when he plugged in one of his custom seven or eight string guitars, he could rip through any progression or scale imaginable at lightning speed. There are still videos of him on YouTube that were made around the time I knew him, and they show him playing various difficult songs and techniques in keys and scales that I am still unfamiliar with. In retrospect, I wish I had taken advantage of having such a knowledgeable teacher. Instead of applying myself and learning the fundamental scales and theory that he tried to teach me, I only asked him to teach me the songs I liked listening to. After taking

lessons from Shane for a few months, he landed a job and traveled out to California to tour and play lead guitar with the metal band KoRn. Shane was replaced by Justin, another Berklee graduate who was still at the store the last time I checked.

I had been playing for about a year when I stopped taking lessons. At that age, I just was not yet interested in learning music or the theory behind it; I just wanted to play like Slash. After hours of struggling with the introduction, I was able to play "Sweet Child O' Mine" fluently enough that people could recognize it. I didn't understand what I was doing, or how the chords were related to each other. I would simply sit down with the tablature and play along with the song, over and over again, until it sounded right to me. Over the next year I stopped growing in my knowledge of music completely; however, my ability to play the guitar itself dramatically improved. Halfway through eighth grade I was living in Oklahoma. I lived in a rural area where children did not go to the movies or to their favorite stores to hang out. Outside of school, my free time was dominated by extracurricular sports, shooting guns and exploring around the land with neighbors, taking care of my livestock and property, and increasing my skills on the guitar. Although I loved my time in the Oklahoma countryside, my mom could not stand feeling so isolated, and we moved back to Destin within a year. While in Oklahoma, I decided that my blue Squier wasn't cutting it anymore; it didn't have enough frets, and was lacking the tone that I

wanted, so we traveled to Tulsa and traded it in for my first "real" electric guitar, a white Ibanez RG model complete with an extended twenty four-fret neck and a pair of pickups designed by EMG. As I was walking out of the store, I dropped my brand new guitar on the asphalt, covering it in cracks, nicks, and scratches that will forever be part of the body. After nearly three more years of such abuse, I still have that guitar, and it has never failed me, even though it occasionally falls by the wayside when I acquire a newer, more exciting instrument. I plan on keeping it forever. I learned the majority of what I know on my white Ibanez, and it has more sentimental value to me than anyone could ever pay me.

Once back in Florida, I went back to my old church, and was excited to see that Dylan was still in charge of leading the youth worship services. By now I could comfortably play anything basic, especially power chords. Power chords are a simple way to turn a single note into a full sounding triad, and they can usually be played in place of a real chord with minimal discrepancy. Power chords are a staple of rock music; so needless to say, I had acquired a good understanding of them through hours of repetition with my iPod by my side. I offered to play with Dylan, and together with a drummer and bassist, we formed a simple praise band that was to be my first gig. After working for nearly two years, I was able to finally play alongside the guy who had inspired me to start in the first place. We had a good time, and were able to play simple songs together

for a few months. Eventually I stopped attending that church, and playing in the band. Outside of church, I had begun jamming with other friends of mine who also played instruments. There was Jason in Fort Walton Beach; a buddy I had played football with who was also learning guitar, Jerrod; my guitarist friend from middle school that introduced me to the rock music I now love so much, and many others. A guy named Alan played drums with me in the church band, and we hung out together a few times. I switched schools so I could attend high school and college at the same time, and graduate with an Associate's degree. Jerrod and Alan came with me, and I began taking lessons with the college instructor, Chris Nida. Once again, I was hooked up with an outstanding teacher, and once again, I was not mature enough to appreciate it. He wanted me to learn more difficult chords so that I could play jazz; instead we just jammed together over rock progressions because I didn't feel like memorizing major scales.

During the winter of my sophomore year, Jerrod and I attended a Velvet Revolver concert in Mobile, Alabama, along with our other friends Kyle and Devon. From what they tell me, I was so excited to finally see Slash in person that I started screaming uncontrollably and picked Kyle up onto my shoulders. That was a really fun night; it was also the first time I was introduced to the music of Alice in Chains. The original singer of that band passed away a number of years ago, and this was the first time they had toured since. I met

the new singer later on that evening, and didn't even recognize him, having never heard any of their music. I finally realized who the guy was about a year and a half later when they released a new album, which has since gone on to totally blow up, throwing them back into the spotlight. After the concert, I was even more inspired to do what I saw happen on the stage, so I went home and learned how to play the entire "Appetite for Destruction" album. After the school year ended, I began looking for another new guitar. Once again, I felt like my guitar just wasn't cutting it anymore, but this time I would settle for nothing less than a Gibson Les Paul, the instrument of choice for so many of my professional musician idols. I finally found one I wanted on EBay, and had it shipped from California as soon as the auction closed. My mom had told me not to open the box until she got home, but I couldn't wait, and ripped the case open so I could start playing it immediately. As soon as I pulled it out of the box, I whacked the neck on the kitchen counter, chipping a chunk of the expensive wood out of the third fret. I felt sick, but now I have come to the conclusion that every new guitar I get goes through the same thing, whether I want it to or not. A few months ago, I finally got a new acoustic guitar (having actually sold my original blue one for more than I paid after keeping it until tenth grade), an expensive Takamine with electric pickups inside and a beautiful dark wood finish on the outside. Once I got it home, without thinking, I walked through a doorway with it around my neck,

and scratched the bottom of it all up. With my new Les Paul in tow, I joined a new church, and established myself as one of the best players in the congregation, getting the job of youth worship lead guitarist for the church with the largest youth program in the area. My role died out after a few months, as the previous youth worship leader, Daniel, moved across the country to attend school in Seattle.

Over the past few months, I have probably learned more about guitar than ever before. I have been taking lessons with a new teacher, Robert Royal, who was also the expert advisor for my senior thesis project, in which I taught a young girl to play some basic material. I am finally to the point where I appreciate learning music theory and difficult jazz chords, and I have realized how much I still have to learn, which has made me work even harder to catch up to the point where I believe I could be had I accepted what my previous teachers tried to teach me for all those years. I have just started learning classical guitar, and very recently I purchased a nylon string Ibanez classical guitar to learn Spanish Flamenco and classical music on. Although I haven't damaged this one yet, I won't be surprised if it is completely destroyed in a week or two. Since the youth program fell apart at my new church, I was promoted and have been playing lead guitar for the church praise band for large crowds every Sunday morning. I am now to the point where I can handle soloing, and everyone feels that adding me has taken our overall sound to the next level of professionalism. Recently, I heard that the

youth worship band was getting back together, under the leadership of a newest addition to my church . . . Dylan. So far we have played together a few times for youth, and have had some of the best performances I have ever been a part of, thanks to the two of us, as well as a very talented drummer, a great bassist, and the Holy Spirit.

Guitar has been something that I have had ever since the first time I touched a string, no matter where I live or what else is going on in my life. It presents relaxation therapy and intellectual challenge at the same time, and can be the most frustrating, as well as the most rewarding endeavor that I have ever known. I am so glad that I am where I am now with my instrument, and although there are a few minor regrets along the way, my journey with guitar will always be a story that I can keep with me. I am excited to continue learning and to see where it takes me in the future. I never would have thought that I would be playing alongside Dylan, so who knows? One day I might get to jam with Slash, or go on my own tour with my own band. Until then, I'll keep working and learning and adding more pages to my story with the guitar.

A Typical Day for Me

Carly Fahey

A typical Friday for me means time for a little shopping with friends, movies, a splash of studying for Comparative Politics and getting my dark blue walker fixed before close of business. That's right, my walker. I may sound like a typical 19-year-old, but in reality, I am a world away from being average. I've lived with Cerebral Palsy all my life and it has put a huge mark on my perspective. My life isn't always as easy as I sometimes hope, but a positive outlook and a little humor carries me through any challenge that I face.

Since the world isn't always going to be accessible for my physical limitations, I have become an expert at adapting to almost any situation. I must always find a different route than my peers, whether I'm going to the movies or just cruising around campus. This happens because all too often curb cuts are only in a few specific places, there's never enough handicapped parking, and it seems that ramps are hidden around the back. It can be frustrating, but I never let it get me down. I am able to think outside of the "able-bodied" box and get pretty creative on a moments notice. Sometimes this means improvising when all I have is my upper body strength and a trusted friend, but that is what makes Carly Fahey so interesting. When my friends and I are driving around, odds are that my walker, cleverly named "Clasmussen," just won't fit in

the trunk of their small cars. Not to worry! Just last week, Clasmussen was bent, taken apart, and stuffed inside my friend's small trunk, but I used creativity and many bungee chords to make it work. My friends and I just laughed it off—which thankfully took all the stress away.

Those unexpected, and even awkward moments in life have now become my fondest memories, without a doubt. At school dances, I always stuck out. I was like a stiff noodle down on the dance floor! I even accidently fell on friends a few times, but it turned out to be a blast anyway. Always bringing laughter and occasionally panic, my disability has seemed to give me a lack of natural fear. After all, if I don't try, then how can I conquer?

As a young girl, horseback riding was both a sport and physical therapy that I would participate in regularly. When I was still a fairly new rider, I was almost bucked off a horse at a competition right before I was about to ride into the ring. It was absolutely terrifying! Although I was shaken and a little scared, I quickly switched to a different horse and silenced my fears. I wasn't about to let a little setback keep me from my goal! Even after all of the excitement, I ended up taking home second place. Not too shabby, huh? I think it was so easy to keep my focus and still succeed, since I was pretty used to expecting the unexpected.

So what if something's never been done before? I know I can always at least give any challenge a try. Looking at me, you would never believe how many

things I have overcome with the power of persistence. For example, it was once a struggle for me to write or even to hold things. I just wanted to increase my independence, so I worked and worked for years in occupational therapy. It was so frustrating, but I kept going. Today, I enjoy typing; have beautiful handwriting, and can even play the flute. I love challenging myself in other areas too, like the classroom. I've taken a few Honors courses, even if it meant I have to spend most of my nights studying to overcome my test-taking anxiety. It all pays off when I know that I am learning and progressing. Such goals might take me an eternity to accomplish, but I see myself as a piece that thankfully never fits in the puzzle. Aren't we all unique anyway?

I've always resented when people judged me by my wobbly walk or speedy contraption, so I have tried my best not to cast similar judgments on others. I'll admit, sometimes it is only natural. But through my quirks that come along with CP, I've chosen to always get past a person's appearances and try to see them for their inner beauty. I love having friends from all walks of life and learning from their differences. I have a few friends of different faiths and I love being able to learn about what they believe or about their different traditions. As I open up my mind to try and understand where they are coming from, I am often reminded of my differences, too. Disability is never really what it may seem, so why jump to conclusions with others' diversity?

The people around me mean a lot. I have friends and family who have always been there for me and I appreciate all that they do. Sometimes my brother will help me carry a crazy object or my friend will give me golden advice on how to cope with man troubles, but I'm always thankful. Other's kindness really counts when you have a disability, and I hope to carry that forward. It makes my day when a stranger offers to open a door for me, or if my friends offer too carry my books every once and a while. I feel that making a difference is so crucial in life; you can move mountains for many with just one deed. If I speak up about the issues that affect my peers and me then maybe I can change perspectives or get outsiders to listen.

It may not be the easiest thing to do, but I know from experience that self-determination can lead you directly to any goal or objective. I've been able to conquer massive set backs with the right attitude. Having CP doesn't ever depress me much; instead it helps me find joy and creativity that I can apply to all parts of life. I know that the sky is the limit. I love that I'm not the average teen, even though I'm still a girly 19-year-old at heart. Disability shows me each day that adapting is fun, people have more inner beauty than one might initially imagine, and making a difference can be one of the finest things you can do in life.

Castile (Phantom Brave)

Nick Grabowski

When looking at inspiring characters in video games, one that can be easily overlooked, yet is still very important, is Castile from Phantom Brave. Phantom Brave is a PlayStation 2 strategy role-playing game that was made for a more niche audience, and the character herself was not playable, so it's easy to overlook her when seeking inspiration.

Castile is a girl with an illness. The illness itself isn't specified in the game, but it leaves her bedridden, and the few times she tries to get up, she is stricken by coughing spasms and is too weak to walk, being forced to use a wheelchair for transport. As such, she has little contact with the outside world, and no friends. After being saved by the main characters in the game, she becomes great friends with them, and slowly becomes an asset to the team. She does so by learning and teaching a species of monsters a special sign language, so that they would be able to communicate with each other. The sign language became essential during the latter parts of the game, where the monsters became part of a plan to seal away the antagonist. Despite her disabilities, she's able to help the party of heroes out in her own way. Although she couldn't fight and couldn't quite help the party at first, she found her own way to help, and became an essential part of the plan to defeat the ultimate evil.

Castile, while not the most well-known of disabled characters in video games, is still a great character to look towards for inspiration, and may be even more so than most of the well-known ones. Unlike other characters, she's much easier to relate to, despite her not having amazing physical strength. In other words, she's more realistic of a character.

Auron Final Fantasy X

Nick Grabowski

One great disabled video game character is Auron from Final Fantasy X. Final Fantasy is a very popular role-playing game series, so the character (Auron) himself is more widely known than others. Despite the fact that he lost one of his arms in the battle against the evil of the game, he is still the most powerful character of your party, and the one most able to dish out the damage to the enemies. Even though he lost his sword arm, he's still able to kick more ass than the rest of your party members. In addition, Auron, unlike the rest of the main cast, seems more down to earth and cool, offering a more level opinion for the group. Even as the city fell around the group, Auron remained calm and collected.

While most would give up with such a dramatic loss as the loss of their dominant sword arm, Auron just deals with it and adapts, and doesn't give up. With his powerful attacks, he's a great choice as a party member throughout most the game, and his super attacks show the true potential of his power. Later in the game you find out even more about Auron, and how much he's really overcome to be what he is at the game's present time. He's a great person to look to as an inspiration, because no matter how much he had to go through, he still overcame it all and became an important part of both the party and the story.

All in The Family

Whitney Harris

Looking at my family and appreciating them is something I like to do often. They are strong people, but I don't believe they really realize how strong they are. I say this because my disability can be looked at and viewed as a deformity, and saying that you are deformed can take a toll on anyone's self-esteem, especially if you are the one who is deformed. But I really lucked out. I was given a family that sees me for me, and I think that's incredible.

Now I'm not saying that families don't usually love their children for who they are, because they do. I'm just stating that my family was given something that they weren't expecting, and they handled it greatly.

When I was born, my mother and father were given the news that their little girl did not have an arm or a leg on her right side. It was a shock and surprise to them. I can't even imagine what that feeling must have been like. I'm sure all parents have that moment though, when they find out that their child has a disability. First they are scared and worried, and I'm sure it takes a while to get used to the fact that their child is going to be different from everyone else, but they find hope when their little one smiles up at them. And as parents, they know that it's their job to protect them and give them everything they need to succeed. My family did exactly that.

If you ask my Dad's Mom (Grandma) or my Mom, they'll both tell you that it was me that set myself up with the strength and courage to do anything I wanted. My Grandma told me that I was the one that went around and told everyone that I was not handicapped, I was just like everybody else. I know that is true, but I also know that I didn't come up with this idea on my own. When you are little, you respond to how people treat you. I was never treated any differently than any of my other siblings or cousins, at least not in a negative way. My cousins always saw the disability as an advantage, because both sets of my grandparents would let me do things that the other cousins weren't allowed to do. I'm not sure if this was because they felt that I needed more attention, saw that I was more trustworthy, were shocked that I wanted to try something new or just thought that maybe I deserved more because I was given less, but there was hardly a time growing up that I was told that I wasn't allowed to do something. The funny thing is that it was like that on both sides of my family.

My Mom's Mother and Stepdad (Granny and Papa) always gave me "special treatment." Whenever my cousins and I wanted to build or make something with my Papa's tools, I got to be the one to ask for permission. It normally wouldn't be a problem, but my cousin Drew and I had a nasty habit of never putting Papa's tools back where we found them. Every time it was my turn to beg, we got to use his tools. He wouldn't even get that mad with us when we would

play in his shed and move things around because they were in our way, thus causing him to lose things. My Granny, on the other hand, would always let my have cookies or candy when the other kids were still outside, as long as I promised not to tell. She always made me feel like I was the favorite (not saying that I am) and that I was very special to her.

On my Dad's side, my cousins were a bit different. They knew my disability was an advantage and they teased me for it. So instead of being made fun of for being different, I was teased for being able to have the upper hand for just being me. So when we wanted to go and play in our Grandparents' woods around their house, I was always made to ask if we knew that the answer would be no. Whenever someone broke something, or we wanted our Grandpa to make us a new object to play with (and most likely break), I was always forced into asking, which looking back at it, may have been a form of bullying. But my success rate was usually higher than my other cousins'. What I love most about my Grandpa and Grandma is that whenever you want to do something or learn the answer to a question, they drop what they are doing to help you out. I'm sure their motives may be different than what I suspect, but I always feel like I'm important to them and that my questions, no matter how odd, are important to them too.

Being biased toward me was something I learned to use to my advantage when I was younger. I admit now that I was wrong, but at the time it always made

me feel good about myself when my Mom would side with me instead of my younger brother Caleb. Caleb and I are three years apart, and that was just enough to make us argue over everything. Usually I would want something to go my way or want to do something that Caleb did not want to do, and being the scrappy kid that he was, Caleb would side against me, which caused us to argue. On occasion we would actually fight and punch, but usually it was scratching and Caleb pulling my hair, but in the end our Mom would always take my side. As a family, we laugh about it now because you can't change the past. I do love Caleb, even though my affection changes its form on occasion.

I don't have a lot of casual memories with my Dad because he owns his own business and enjoys going hunting as often as the laws will let him, but that's okay. Whenever I do spend time with my Dad, it's always enjoyable. My Mom says that my Dad and I think a lot alike (which is naturally to her disadvantage) and that is probably why we get along so well. He always listens to my ideas and opinions as if they really interest him. I like to think they do, because he will ask questions and puzzle over things I've said. Now that I don't live at home, he always wants to know what's new and how things are going. He makes me feel like my opinion really matters, and I love being able to tell him about new things I've learned because he's usually more interested than my siblings.

And naturally, my Mom is always there for me. We never really sat down and discussed my life and what

things will be like for me, but it was never something that was necessary. My Mom got more offended by people staring at me than anyone else I know. I'm sure it was because I was her daughter, and it was her responsibility to protect me. I remember often when we would be walking through the grocery store and my Mom would suddenly start yelling or sternly speaking with some stranger. Usually it was because their child was staring or pointing and being rude, and my Mother was completely offended. So she let the other person know. After embarrassing the strangers we would just walk away, and plenty of times I wouldn't really notice this confrontation until she came back to the grocery cart mad as a hornet. My Mom stood up for me even when I didn't realize I needed to be stood up for. She would have no problem telling someone exactly how she felt in order to keep me safe. It's amazing how much she has been through for me that I know nothing about. As far as I know, my life has been normal, but maybe that's because my Mom has gone out of her way to make sure my life seemed as average as possible. At times, I feel like she's been through more emotional trauma than I have. I don't even have the words to say how much I appreciate that.

Growing up in my household with one sister and three brothers was always fun. My siblings never left me out of anything when we were young. Despite not having an arm or leg, I used to love climbing trees with my older brother, Dean. And even though I was never great at any sports, my little sister, Susie, always

takes my advice about how to play or how to act. My youngest brother, Sam, loves cooking with me, even though I have to do thing differently, and I end up teaching him different ways to do things too.

My family never treated me like anything other than family, and I think growing up I saw that and it made me feel like I wasn't any different. I actually think it helped me to think that I could do anything. But most families are like this. They support and encourage each other to do the impossible. That's what makes families so great. But my family is different. My family is different because they have me. And for that I am very grateful.

Life with Illusion

Whitney Harris

I've never been the kind of girl who sits by the wayside and lets life pass her by. I love to go out and do new things, so that I can come back later and say that I've done it. In my 19 years of life I've already done many astounding things, most of which people would not be able to grasp, having not known me. Why? Because I'm missing two of my limbs: my right arm and right leg. I've played all the sports my heart desired. No one in my family ever questioned me, or brought it to my attention that I was different. According to my mother, I never thought I was different, and waking up a little girl from her illusion of being the same as other kids could have made life a lot harder in the long run.

I remember thinking that my children would be born without their arm and leg, because I was missing my arm and leg. I just figured that my missing limbs were just like a hair color or a skin color, that it was genetic. And maybe it just skipped a few generations. But besides that, I never put much thought into it.

Ballet and tap were my first little adventures, but every move I made was lopsided, every step I took was uneven. And while looking at myself in the mirror during rehearsals, I honestly am not sure why I didn't give up. But my theory is that when I looked in those mirrors, I didn't see a little seven year old girl, missing an arm and a leg. I saw a ballerina. I saw the best tap

dancer in the panhandle. It never crossed my mind that I wasn't or that I never would be. I was just like every other seven-year-old little girl in that dance studio, and you couldn't tell me differently.

As I got older, it still never occurred to me that I couldn't be like everyone else. I played indoor soccer for one season and was a very committed Girl Scout and basketball player well into middle school. But middle school brought more challenges for me than I expected. It started out pretty average: just getting from class to class on time. After being late for only one class, I felt like I had mastered maneuvering through the halls. I didn't adapt quite as easily with my sports career. Basketball went from playing on half the court to playing on the full court, which included a lot more running. And because I played at a public recreation center, every child had to play a certain amount of time. It wasn't like I could just play until I was tired and sit out the rest of the game, now I had to run back and forth across the entire length of a basketball court much more than I wanted to. It was hard the first game, and didn't get easier the more games that I had.

I didn't just stick with basketball in middle school, I decided to add something new to the mix and try karate. Starting out, I found it to be fun and interesting. My next door neighbor was also taking karate at that time, and I loved the thought of being able to fight him and take him down. But karate didn't stay simple. The more I advanced through the belt rankings, the

more things had to be adapted to me. It wasn't that I just had to learn a karate form, but I also had to relearn it in my own way so that I could rehearse the form to look like everyone else. Even using different weapons became a challenge. My nunchuk forms were all done with my one hand, instead of two. they wouldn't even allow me to use some weapons do because I "couldn't wield them with one hand." It was hard, and even the karate school practiced in front of mirrors so that you could see what you were doing and perfect your moves. Those mirrors were no different to me. I still looked in them and thought that I would be the most feared black belt in the school. You couldn't convince me differently.

I started band in those same adolescent years, and I was given the choice to be a drummer or a French horn player. I never in my wildest dreams imagined playing the French horn, and after blowing through the mouth piece I knew that it was not the instrument for me, so I found percussion to be my calling by default. I can't say that drumming was easy. I couldn't even try to trick you and say it was. I was playing in a sport of the arts that was made for two armed people, but I wasn't about to let anyone tell me differently. I experienced days where I had no idea why I bothered to put myself through this embarrassment. I didn't have two arms, and no matter with prosthetics or not, I never would. I knew that my drum rolls didn't sound correct, but the praise I got wasn't from playing like everyone else, it was for giving it my best attempt to sound like everyone

else. So I learned to adapt. I didn't play the instruments whose sound quality depended on having two hands, but instead went to the instruments that added more color to the music. I played mostly auxiliary percussion, which includes instruments such as the tambourine, sleigh bells, suspended cymbals, triangle and bongos. But I really enjoyed playing the concert bass drum. It was loud and a very important part, and it could be played with one hand. The other kids in the percussion section never pointed out to me that half of the things I played probably sounded awful and uneven. They never stopped me from picking a part that should have been played by a person with two hands. And one person in particular went out of his way to make me seem like the coolest girl on the planet. He would go on and on about how having one arm and one leg was more exciting and made me more interesting. Even if I didn't think I could do something, I knew he believed I could, and I couldn't let him down. And looking back, I'm glad, because my illusion wasn't holding up as strong as I became older.

By the time I started high school, I was starting to really catch on to the reoccurring trend that even though I believed I was just like everyone else, I had trouble keeping pace with my peers. The only two activities that followed me into high school were basketball and drum line. But I added new things, like being president of my high school's Knitting Club, joining the Forensic Chemistry Club, Keyettes, jazz band and three honor societies.

Freshman band auditions were like stepping in front of a room full of scientists and trying to spell all the names of the elements from the Periodic Table. I knew the material, but getting the little things correct was a challenge for me. I felt so embarrassed because this was the "Big Leagues," this was high school. I was playing on marimbas that were shared by upper classmen, people who had authority to tell me that I was too different to play on their instruments. But no one ever did. I struggled and I knew I did, but no else ever brought it to my attention. And after a few months of playing, I stopped pointing out to myself that I was dragging exercises or not playing rhythms that were too challenging. I was comfortable with being a mediocre mallet player, but I didn't notice, because in those mirrors, I couldn't see myself. All of the mallet players that could play the more interesting and challenging parts were in the front closer to the mirror. And I stood closer to the back, blocked from view behind them.

But one year at a local percussion day, schools from all around the area came and played percussion together. I was playing a piece that made me struggle because I couldn't get my one hand to play as fast as everyone else's two hands, and one of the volunteers that day pointed that out to me. All he said was, "You're dragging," and I thought I was going to burst into tears. I was trying, couldn't he see that? How dare he say that to me. I know he only meant to say it because I was indeed dragging and he thought I should know,

but I took it to heart. I was devastated. It was like I was being told that I wasn't good enough, even though I was trying. I kept playing the piece the exact same way even though I drug, but I knew I shouldn't have because I was hurting all the strangers around me by making the ensemble's music sound gross. It was rude of me. I should have accepted it and just played half the notes. But that was the first time someone had pointed out that my one hand wasn't enough and that I needed to adapt a different style or technique.

I never really thought about trying out for the high school basketball team. But I figured, being on my high school's basketball team would be something I could tell everyone I ever met about and they would be impressed. After two days of try-outs, I was done. It wasn't for me. There were plenty of girls trying out that were stronger, faster, and had a better shooting record than me. I didn't bother going to the third try-out because I didn't see the reason to put me on the team. I would just hold everyone back. I felt dumb for even putting myself out there to just have it slapped in my face that I couldn't keep up.

The next day I stood by myself in one of the practice rooms in the band building, right in front of a mirror. I was practicing my mallet instrument and working on technique when I stopped and finally looked in the mirror and saw myself. Not the most sought after musician, or the WNBA star. I saw me. One arm and one leg short of the standard. And it struck me: I couldn't be delusional and live in the

illusion that I was like everyone else. I would have to fight to keep up in most sport activities in my life. And it wouldn't be easy. But I could do it. I had the will. I was going to conquer other tasks just to say that I did it. But I was grateful for having discovered this on my own, not to have it forced at me all of these years. So I stopped starring at the girl in the mirror and went back to practicing my two mallet grip with my one hand, my new adapted technique. Because I would make up for those lost notes, and stop settling for being an okay mallet player. I would play to the best of my ability and make sure that that was more than what was needed.

I soon saw my name on the roster for the girl's junior varsity basketball team. I was shocked, but so excited. I did it. And now I knew that I would have to fight to keep up, and I was okay with that. I had made the team over other girls that were more athletic than I was, so I needed to prove that I belonged there. I never finished a drill in the set time and missed almost every shot that I went for, but I always finished the drills. And I always practiced my shots every chance we got. After most games, I would sit in my Jeep and wish that I could be better for my team. I thought that maybe if I didn't hold them back, they could be the best. But I made the varsity team the next year, and the year after that. I never got told to run faster or try harder. No one ever yelled because I was slowing the team down. The coach told me later that I made the team each year because I wasn't the strongest, the fastest or the best shooter, but because I was out there giving it my all to

try to be. And that, said my coach, made me the heart and soul of the team.

So overall, my life has presented me with many challenges, but I never looked at them as such. I lived with an illusion that I was just like everyone else, and I believe it made my life better because I was never brought down by peer pressure or the feeling of not being good enough to play any sport. Today, when I look in the mirror, I see a bright young lady, ready to conquer the world!

A Hand and a Heart: The Blessing of Friendship

Ashlen McWhorter

The icy breeze playfully nipped at my bare arms as if to coax me from my spot on the damp, crowded bench. Growing more numb by the second, my fingers began to form a stiff outer housing around my camera, which had become almost as much of a part of me as my pale skin. Turning away from the ruckus of parents hastily fastening tiny shoes on tiny, frozen feet and adults boisterously conversing about plans for the rest of the evening, I stood up and leaned against the wall behind the noisy crowd. What I saw was breathtaking. It was a sheet of crystal clear ice, glistening and donning the reflections of the slender, surefooted figures that glided over its even surface. The flashing blades made the most beautiful abstract designs as they scraped the perfect surface, creating a wake of tiny ice crystals behind them. A small cloud greeted the chilled air as I sighed, wishing I could be one of the skaters that seemed to fair accordingly well in such a foreign environment so different from the mild tropical climate of the beach, though for many it was their very first experience being on the ice. I waved, flashing a satisfied smile to the friends that I knew were having the time of their lives. I was glad to see them laughing, chatting, and thoroughly enjoying something that seemed impossible in Florida. While, in truth I watched as the ice caused bruises for the

ones that still had not learned to work with it properly, it still seemed so picturesque. Immediately the image of Christmas postcards of frozen country ponds came to mind: nature's mirrors, on which red and green scarves, ear muffs, mittens, and heavy woolen coats danced.

In my mind, the skaters might as well have been wearing winged sandals and have been flying amongst icy clouds, ready to gently powder the earth with snow, rather than simply moving over the slippery ground. I longed to be a part of all the wintry magic. However, I felt my heart sink into my chest as I looked down at the feet and legs that could not even help me to walk for anything more than a very short distance, the same legs that kept me from dancing, gymnastics and so many other activities that I considered to be beautiful art expressions. Those arts were for individuals with beautiful, slender, flexible bodies, who had very muscular and fit, yet very elegant, frames. Me, with my left calf muscle that had atrophied away to become nothing more than flesh and bone, my two feet that had lost their sensation long ago, could not be part of that world. With a left foot that flopped as I stepped because of paralysis, the obvious difference between the length of my legs, and the troublesome tilt in my pelvis, I was nothing like those beautiful figures. With tears in my heart, I was forced to come back from my lofty land of dreams to the reality that I would be as weak and unfit for the ice as a flopping, limp scarecrow with skates. That feeling was all too familiar. I began snapping loads of photos of my friends, documenting all

the fun from the sidelines to keep myself from revisiting those painful feelings and impossible dreams. I firmly decided that this was just another hardship that I was to endure with the strength that had come from the many difficulties that are just part of living with a disability. Plus, it was one of my very best friend's birthdays, and she had carefully planned the day in order to give each and everyone of her friends a wonderful time. Seeing the look of sheer, unbridled joy on their faces sparked special, hidden warmth in my heart. I was so glad that those who had made some of the best memories with me and had supported me during the difficult transition to high school were making another joyful memory that would take ages and ages for the sands of time to begin to wear away.

Struggling on the side of the rink away from the jovial group, awkwardly walking on the icy layer rather than sliding across the slick surface, was Eryn, the youngest member of my circle of friends. As she tightly gripped the wall, her somber expression tugged at my heart. Each time she passed the place on the wall where I was leaning, we would converse for a little while and then she would continue on her trek around the edge of the rink. Later on, I shared with her my silly desire to answer the burning question of what it felt like to move on the silvery ice. I laughed as I assured her that I would most definitely be far more awkward than anyone else and so it was really silly for me to even play around with the idea of trying on a pair of skates. Plus, the birthday girl's parents had generously paid for each of her friends' rental skates and wrist bands. I

didn't want to waste the family's money just so I could fulfill this quest for being that had an overwhelming likely chance of ending in failure. I didn't think that trying on a pair of skates and stepping on the ice and back off again would be worth ten dollars of someone else's money. I just couldn't justify taking a chance. After presenting my idea to Eryn, her face lit up as she told me that she really wouldn't be annoyed at all if I tried on her skates. She wanted me to do it just so that I could get a taste of the fun.

Quickly she scooted off the ice, perhaps relieved to be on the steady ground of the textured mats. She sat down next to me at the benches where mothers were still helping their children try on different sizes of skates to find the best fit. I couldn't have known exactly how heavy and bulky the skates were until they were on my feet. It probably didn't help that this pair of skates was a size four when I only required a miniscule size one. Either way, I beamed with excitement as Eryn and her mother knelt in front of me to lace up the elegant bladed boots. They pulled the laces as tight as they could manage, creating a beautiful lattice-work design in their wake. At first, all I could do was stare at my feet, clad in the gorgeous shoes, for once looking exactly like everyone else's there. No one could have ever guessed that I had any type of a physically limiting medical condition as I proudly donned the skates. I felt empowered, as if my disability was hidden by the new accessories. That little taste of the magic fueled my desire to try even more and gave me an intense

burst of joy that caused all my fears and doubts to melt despite the freezing temperatures. I wanted to feel the glass smooth ice moving beneath my feet. I imagined how the wintry air would feel rushing at my face and racing through my thick curls. But, as always, reality caught my dreaming mind and dragged it down to earth. How could I manage on the slippery ground with the bulky size four skates tugging at my limp feet each time I took a step?

Blushing with a shy smile, I divulged to Eryn and her mother my intense desire to close my eyes, take a deep breath, and simply jump out into the merry crowd of skaters. I felt almost sure that I could make things work somehow, because I wanted them to work badly enough, reminiscent of the tales of the beautiful but poor maidens who win the love of the handsome prince because they deserved his admiration more than anyone else in the land. I knew that I wasn't going to emerge as a princess of the ice, but I knew that my imagination could take me anywhere I wanted to go if I could just be on the slippery silver surface. Still, as the words escaped my mouth I was reminded of the numerous children that have their hopes set on becoming a glittery Hollywood movie star or an astronaut that discovers an alien life form on Mars. The whole idea just seemed so absurd. However, to my surprise, Eryn's mother encouraged me to go for it if that was truly what I wanted. After all, there was a wall to hold on to and a whole group of my friends who wouldn't mind lending a hand if needed.

I gingerly but awkwardly walked across the textured mats to the ice, my feet wobbling and curving inward with every step, absorbing every detail about how strange it felt to walk on blades. The sensation reminded me of what I imagined walking on stilts probably felt like. A very close friend tightly grasped my hand as I carefully placed one skate on the ice. My foot clumsily greeted the mirror-like surface as I dragged my other skate onto the rink, steadying myself with the help of the firm hold I had on my friend and the grip of my other hand on the wall. At first, I just let my legs freely slide forward and backward underneath me in order to feel the slick ice and watch the designs it made on the smooth surface, creating little trails of ice dust. Then, I began to pull myself across the frozen ground by tugging on the outer wall. The ice was so smooth that I felt as if I was floating, gliding, hovering a few inches above the ground. As I pulled on the wall, my feet gently and effortlessly slid over the frozen sheet, I closed my eyes as images of myself flying through a silver snowflake laden sky, snow flurries powdering my hair and eyelashes, a brisk December wind whispering through my hair and brushing past my arms, and the reflection of the moon illuminating the silvery town below, colored my thoughts. When my eyes were closed, I was no longer the girl struggling to move across the ice wearing overly large skates, I was a spirit of winter that sent the frozen bursts of wind to sing through the still winter forest or a snowy swan dancing through the frozen, moonlit sky.

Soon, I got up the confidence to pull enough times on the wall to reach a certain speed where I could let go and coast for several seconds, mimicking the contour of the wall with my blades so that I could make a fluid turn instead of smacking against the barrier at the edge of the rink. When I would lose the momentum I had built up with the help of the rail, I would throw myself at the wall again and pull. As time passed, I could begin to feel the muscle in my arms and shoulders tense as I propelled myself. I was growing tired, having lost track of how long I had been manhandling the wall. Stopping to rest in the corner, I leaned against the rail and observed the frozen hands that had permanently conformed to its shape and the muscles that could no longer relax. I closed my eyes once more as I allowed my legs to slide back and forth over the glassy smoothness. A smile of satisfaction spread over my face at the thought of what I was able to accomplish and experience. I knew that I was sure to wake up the next morning with aching muscles, but I couldn't care less. Soreness just meant to me that I had worked hard to achieve, something that many people would have never even imagined that I could achieve or something that others would be too afraid to let me try. The soreness in my muscles seemed an indication that I had lived and enjoyed every second of my experience.

The entire time that I was on the ice, my friends would take turns skating alongside me so that I never felt alone and I could always feel the warmth of their

support as they chatted and laughed with me. Never once did they make me feel silly or stupid for trying to teach my mangled feet to become like those of a steady skater. I knew without a doubt that they were happy for me to be chasing my dreams and not letting them slip away. Their warm smiles and laughter filled my heart with joy because I knew that they were there to help me achieve anything that I wanted if it was important to me, even if it seemed absolutely ridiculous. I looked up to the ceiling of the rink as if looking past it, past the sky and clouds, and directly into heaven, marveling at the amazing miracles that God had given me in the friends that skated next to me, holding my hand almost the entire time. So many times I wonder why God had made me the way he did, why I had to learn to accept that I could never become the light-footed dancer that had always danced across the stage of my dreams, or why I had to learn to be grateful even when it meant that I had to sit on the sidelines and watch others play basketball in gym. I had learned to accept these limitations and to make the best of the things that I was given, understanding that not any one person can be gifted in everything. Even still, sometimes I would feel the painful restraints placed on me by my disability. I would have to watch the incredibly talented Irish step dancers at the civic center click flawlessly to the beat of the music as if they had become one with it, mingling into the measures on the sheet music. I remember how badly I wanted to be one of them; how I felt I wanted to devote my life to the pursuit of dance. But, I had to come back to reality and, with a bitter sigh and

a tear, realize that that must not be my job in this life no matter how much I wanted it to be. During those times, I do wonder why I was given this body that I must struggle to work with. However, as I was on the ice, I didn't ask God why I was given my weak legs and lopsided hips, I asked him what I ever did to deserve the wonderful friends that he had given me: the friends that could see past my disability, my crutches, or my wheelchair; the friends that could coax out a smile or a giggle even during the most miserable times in the hospital; the friends that told me that I could dance, or skate, or anything else that I wanted; the friends that never thought I was silly for trying something new, for following my dreams, or for just being myself. I don't know much about life yet, but I know that God works in mysterious ways and he gives you everything you need, even if it is not necessarily what you think you want.

All night I thanked God for everything he had given me: my family, my friends, love, and even my body because I believe that there is a special reason even for that, just as I wasn't placed into the wonderful family that I was on accident. As friends grasped my hands tightly in theirs and helped me glide across the ice along with my dreams, I closed my eyes trying not to let a tear escape. I wanted to remember that moment forever because it was one of those special moments when you realize just how lucky you are and how beautiful life is even though it can be a rough and long path to walk. I knew that I was loved despite all

the things that used to make me feel defective and less human. I may not be the beautiful slender dancer that I had always pictured, but I have an amazing source of support and love. While my friends aren't always perfect, just knowing that they see me as who I am and not what I am and are always there to cheer me on is a priceless gift.

I will never forget the warmth of their hands, which represented for me the warmth of our friendship, as they helped me to achieve my dream. I will always look back with fondness on the memories of me hugging my friends' waists tightly as they pulled my feet over the slick silver below. I'll always laugh in my heart as I remember how two of my friends skated with me in the middle, each one holding one of my hands, forming a small human barrier on the ice. I let out a surprised squeal as we sprinted over the frozen ground, my legs slipping outward, almost knocking over the other skaters with our wide formation. Even as my legs slid out from under me, with my friend's attentive care, I never did fall once. Half of the fun was coming up with new ways to pull me without letting my legs slip out from under my body. My stomach ached as I laughed until the muscles could take it no longer, as I lost my balance and landed on the back of another friend who would join me in the epidemic of uncontrollable laughter, helping me regain my balance.

When the time came, I didn't want to give up my skates or accept the bitter truth that the night was over, but my aching arms, shoulders, and neck told

me that it was time to go. I took some pictures to help permanently cement the memory of the joy and thrill of the night in my mind. Seeing me wearing the beautiful blades of an able-bodied skater always reminds me that I can do and be anything if I want it enough, and that no dream is silly. Even though it is really easy to ask why, why am I stuck in this wheelchair, why can't I walk like everybody else, or why do I have to have so many operations, sometimes dwelling on whatever we want but don't have blinds us to the beauty that exists all around us. Sometimes, not having everything is what gives us the ability to see or experience the world in a different and beautiful way. Having a disability has caused me to realize just how important and special friendships are because it is not always easy to find people that are able to see past the crutches or the limp. Friends that I have are very special people who have truly helped me to grow and mature as an individual, to learn to love myself, and to never let any of my dreams slip away. Just as I would be a different person if I was born without a disability, I would be a different person if I had never come to know my friends. I don't know what life holds for me, but no matter how overgrown or rocky the path might become along the way, I know that I am very blessed because I have the loving support that could help my mind to dream, my limp feet to skate, and that can help me make it along my path.

My Life Story

Cinthia Melgar

My mother tells stories of how I was born. She says that it was a difficult labor. I was already 9 days late. She was just walking along the side walk when the pains came. Poor mother, she was all alone. She had no one on her side. She had divorced my father due to infidelity, or so she says; but I am not going to play the "he said, she said" game. Apparently, while she was on her walk the pain began. A very kind women saw her and immediately knew that I was coming. The lady took my mother by the arms and told her to walk into an empty room. It is said that a lonely man lived in that room and died. No one had rented out or stayed in that room ever since until this lady told my mother to go in there. She really had no choice either way. It took my mother many hours to give birth to me. I wasn't born in a hospital like most babies. Back in Honduras most people didn't have money for that so they had their relatives act as midwifes in order to bring babies to the world. My mother says that I was born so big that she couldn't believe that I was inside of her. Kind of reminds me of when my son was born. After recuperating from labor she took me to my fathers house. There my father saw me and had to believe that I was his.

As months passed, my mother decided to leave me with my father and travel to California, looking for a better life. At the age of 18 months old I tripped

and fell. After that accident things were not the same. I had fractured my legs. At times I wish I had never tripped and fallen, but maybe it was in my destiny to have fallen. My dad took me to a doctor and he told my dad that I was to wait till my wounds would heal. Months went by and I could not get myself to stand up and walk. I had to drag myself to wherever I needed to go. My dad had to take me again to that doctor, and he said that my bones were fractured and that he needed to do surgery. My dad said to go ahead and do what needs to be done. Little did he know that they would make things worse. They cut the right side of my right leg open. The doctor cut the bone piece by piece. I have no recollection of what else happened.

As the years went by I went through some things that no child should go through. My father barely paid attention to me. He was always working to bring money into the house and keep his so called wonderful wife satisfied. He never really understood what she was underneath it all. She was like the stepmothers in the Disney stories, only much worse. She used to taunt me with threats, like telling me she would bury me alive if I spoke to my father about the cruel things she would say and do to me.

A regular day with her was getting up in the morning to be tied up to a chair with a rope and forced to watch adult movies. Whenever I didn't understand what she was asking of me and she was ironing, she would turn around and grab my hands to burn them with the hot iron. The pain was so unbearable that to

this day I don't know how I survived. My dad never saw the marks because she would cover them with a cloth and tell my father that I was messing around with the iron while she was ironing his clothes. Later, when she felt aggravated, or when my father did something she didn't like and made her mad, she'd grab a rubbing feeling belt and hit me with it. Sometimes she would make sure the belt buckle hit me so I could feel the pain more. No one had any idea of the markings because she made sure to hit me where my clothing would cover. My father couldn't know anything about what she did or else I would pay. Her hands would touch my legs and I could feel the fingers wrapping around the bone area that hurt the most. She knew that my legs were fragile and still she would grip the bone. One day she sent me to the corner of our block to sell corn. She said that if I returned and did not sell all the corn I could not come inside the house. We needed the money in order to buy more food. I even had to sell the only gold necklace my mother had sent me from Miami.

The only thing that my father did do while I was with him was mention my mother to me. There was a picture of her on the living room table and he would always show it to me. I honestly couldn't believe she was my mother, because to me, my step mother was my mother. I don't know how I could say something like this, but being so young, I kind of believed that what my stepmother did to me was ok.

At my 6th birthday party my mother came to get me. She had married a wealthy guy in Miami. He

was about 20 years older than my mother. When I met her I didn't even recognize her. I didn't want to go with her at all; all I wanted was to stay with my dad. She said that if I went with her she would take me to a special doctor that could help me walk again. I decided that I would go, even though I wanted my dad to come along, but he had no legal documents to travel to the US. He was an illegal immigrant. My mother had already prepared legal documents for one of my brothers and me. The day I had to leave was one of my saddest days. I remember crying the entire way to Miami. I didn't want to leave my father.

After about a week of getting used to a new home and family, she took me to visit that special doctor that would help me walk again. We went to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami where I met Dr. Stricker. He examined me and said to my mother that I had Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI). He had a very long talk with my mother through an interpreter and told her that I needed to have surgery done. They made all kinds of tests and took blood. I don't remember exactly the date of the surgery but what I do remember is the day it happened. I was so nervous. He explained to her that in one day he would put 4 rods in my legs. 2 would go on my left leg and 2 on my right leg. On each side he would put one that goes from my hip to my knee. The other ones would go from my knee to right before my ankle. These rods would straighten out the bone in my legs which in time would allow me to walk.

After surgery I needed at least about 6 months to 1 year with a cast. When the cast came off I would start therapy. Therapy would help me bend my legs and put pressure on them in order to be able to stand and take my first steps. After the surgery I had to learn to walk all over again. Of course, I needed to wear braces. These braces helped me keep my balance and keep my legs straight. The doctor said that in time the bone would begin to bend again and he would have to go back and put the rods in place again. I went through some rough and tough therapy to get to where I wanted to. Over time I learned that I wasn't going to be able to run like all other kids. I did research at school about my disability and learned that it would be forever. I learned that I wouldn't grow, due to a lack of calcium to the bones.

After years passed, I knew I couldn't do all the activities that most of the kids were doing. If I had fieldtrips at school, I would have to go in a wheelchair in order to protect myself from falling and fracturing my bones. At a very young age I came to realize that I wasn't going to find a boy to like me. I started 6th grade at Citrus Grove Middle School and liked a boy. He didn't have a disability like me. He was what people call "normal." I looked at myself and thought that I was never going to find someone to love me for me. So I started to be someone else.

I wanted to be pretty like my sister. I got good grades in school and was somewhat obedient at home. I did everything my mother said: dishes, sweeping

the house, helping with laundry, and cleaning the bathrooms and stuff. She said that one day I was going to get married and my husband would hate me and not love me if I did not learn how to be a good wife. She said that he would be allowed to hit me if I wasn't cooking and cleaning how it's supposed to be. My mother and sister became very mean to me. My sister one day told me something that mother had mentioned to her. She said that the reason why they didn't like taking me to the mall was because I took forever to walk and I had to always stop and rest. They didn't want to deal with people looking at me and feeling sorry for me.

Yet, another type of abuse began: the most hurtful kind, verbal abuse. My mother would always bring me down by saying that I was never good enough. Never did I do something right in her eyes. If I did the dishes, she would smack me because I did one dish wrong. "Your husband is not going to love you. He will beat you if you don't know how to cook right" and my favorite: "No one will ever love you if you can't be a good wife" were just some of the things she would keep saying to me. If the house wasn't swept or mopped right, I was a dirty nasty person to her. Again, all the things that she said to me, I actually believed every word. It wasn't until I hit 10th grade that I started to get tired of things. Every night I would cry myself to sleep thinking "How much longer can I take this life?" "Am I going to live with her forever like this?" was one of my deepest questions. I needed to find a way out. I just wasn't brave enough. I was actually scared of my mother. Well, to this day I am afraid of her.

So, when I was in 10th grade, I decided to backfire. I began to hangout with more brave (bad) crowds, people who weren't afraid to do what they wanted. I began skipping school and answering back to my mother. That didn't make things at home any better. One day I looked at myself in the mirror and said to myself, "What are you doing with your life? How do you plan to get ahead and graduate if you keep messing things up?" One day my mother was called to the school to speak about my absences. When we both got there, one of the vice principals was telling her that I had too many absences and if I didn't excuse them I would not be able to graduate. Boy did I receive my punishment when I got home. She told me that I was a bad daughter, good for nothing of a person, and that I was worth nothing. I went to my room and started crying with anger. I said to myself that I couldn't handle one more day of this abuse. It was every single day that she would say something to bring my self-esteem down. If it's not that I am too fat, it's that no one will love me. How much longer will I take this? I called my good friend Josh. He was with Rosey at the time when we were on the phone. I guess she heard him trying to calm me down and she got on the phone. She told me that if I wanted to get out that I could go to her house and stay with her until I could get on my own.

That was the day I got the courage to get away from her and get away from all the negativity. I got a black trash bag and put all the clothes I knew I would need for school and for casual wearing. I grabbed a

huge tiger I got for Valentine's day that year, and my book bag with all my books for school. My heart was beating so fast and hard that I thought it was going to leave my body. My hands were shaky and I kept going over the steps in my head of how I was going to get away. I waited until my mom had to go and run an errand. Rosey sent a friend to come and help me with my bag and stuff. While I was walking out with the bags and stuff my sister was walking out of the bathroom. She looked at me and asked me, "What are you doing? Where are you going?" All I asked from her was not to say a thing, to act like if she didn't see anything. She agreed.

When mother arrived home she asked my sister where I was and my sister told her that she hadn't seen me home and that some of my things were gone. My mother immediately called the cops, but to my advantage I was 18 years old already. She called my cell phone and began telling me that I was an ungrateful daughter for leaving and not appreciating everything she had done to bring me here and get me fixed up (meaning the surgery and ability to walk). That day I felt really bad for leaving just like that. I would sleep at night and wake up scared thinking she'd found me and was going to take me back. Whenever I was out with my friend fear came over me thinking that she would see me and grab me and yell at my friend. Little by little those fears began to disappear. I felt free and myself again. The person I wanted to be and become was flourishing in me.

Back at school, I decided to change myself around regarding my grades. Honestly, I didn't regret skipping school. It may sound awful or not right, but those days that I did skip I did things I dreamed of doing. I went to friends' houses and just hung out until we had to walk back to school. I got on a bus and went all the way to Sweetwater, which I hadn't done. Not only did I have fun, but I did it with my besties Robin, Lokie, and Jessy. Instead of being 3 muskateers we were the 4 muskateers.

At last the day I thought was never going to come actually came. On this day I was so excited and hoping my mother would show up and see how I was able to improve on my own, how I could actually make it on my own. It was kind of just proving to her that I can live on my own and not need anyone's help. I got to thank Rosey and her family for giving me a home when I really needed one, and for helping me get my things straight. If it really wasn't for her I wouldn't have broken out of that place. I sat on that chair waiting for my name to be called so they could hand me the fake diploma (for now). After the ceremony was over we all had to go to the front of the auditorium to see our family members. When I walked outside I was expecting my mom to be there, but to my surprise no one had shown up. At that time I was living with my friend Robin and her family. Her mom came up to me and hugged me because she knew I was about to cry. She also surprised me and bought my plaque. I was so happy, still I decided to call my sister and ask her why they didn't show up. They

all had enough tickets. When she answered the phone and I asked her, she said that my mom was feeling sick and that's why she didn't show up.

After graduation Robin's family took me to Benihana to have dinner as a celebration. The memory of that night is one of my favorites. If you were to put it in a timeline, then that would be my top favorite memory. I felt wanted and needed by people who were being genuine. I actually felt like I had sister. They were all so nice and compassionate towards me. I loved living with them and being part of their family.

One day I saw this tall handsome man who goes by the name of Ulises walk up to the car I was in. When I first laid eyes on him to me he was a mean guy, from what I had heard from his girlfriend at the time. So I began to dislike him. She was my best friend at the time. We went to college together and even lived in the same apartment. As time passed, she would invite him over for dinner, and even to sleep over. It was those times when his true person was shown to me. We began to have conversations that would seem stupid to her, and we had video games in common. He one day brought his Nintendo and Xbox to our apartment. All we wanted to do together, including her, was play. Eventually she got tired and began complaining about him and me spending too much time playing together. I guess you can call it jealousy. I always stayed respectful to their relationship. I would encourage them to talk their problems out, until the end of their relationship came. It may be evil to say this, but fortunately our

friendship came to an end as well. Let's just say that all the secrets I told her about my secret crush were revealed to him without my consent.

Months passed and Ulises and I were becoming closer as friends. We hung out and watched movies, talked, and played video games. To me he became not just any ordinary man. He respects women, he is romantic, funny, and handsome. He sees beyond my disability. I fell in love with him immediately even though he was the forbidden fruit. We were friends at first and then I felt those butterflies and knew he was the one. I moved in with him and he treats me like a queen. We spoke about children and he knew I yearned to become a mother and have a family. We became open about it and now we have a beautiful family. I have the ideal husband and a son that's full of personality. After struggle after struggle, and going through obstacles day by day, I have the family I wanted for so long. Being a mom for the first time is such an amazing opportunity. I get the chance to talk, teach, and learn things about my son that my mother never did with me.

I am not going to college at the moment but I still plan to go. Even though I can't go to the campus because I need to watch my son, I will try going online. Going to college online will give me the opportunity to raise my son and go to school at home. Yes, I am a stay at home mom and loving it. I wish I had a job and was able to bring home some bacon as well, but my son is my priority and work needs to wait. Raising

a baby is not as easy, especially for someone who has OI. My son sometimes needs to be carried and I am not able to do it. My disability won't let me stand or walk for a long distance. My son is growing and soon he will be crawling and I won't be able to run after him. My hubby will have to do that. I am so happy where I am at. My son is healthy and my husband loves me more than ever. I could not have wished for a better family. They are irreplaceable.

Yeah, I'm an Aspy – So What?!

Chris Regan

When I was born, I seemed just like all other kids. I learned five words by the time I was one year old and there didn't seem to be any problems. However, about six weeks after receiving my twelve month vaccinations, I stopped talking. Since I was my parents' first child, they thought that I didn't "want" to speak and they didn't become alarmed. After all, they knew that I was capable of speaking because I had done it before. My pediatrician didn't seem concerned either, at least not until I turned two. Then he recommended some testing with a speech therapist. Her conclusion was that I had a severe expressive language delay; I no longer knew how to talk and I had to be taught.

After four months of speech therapy, I said my first words. Six months after that, I had met all the therapist's articulation goals and I moved on to working on social skills. (They were a little rusty because it's hard to practice them when you don't talk.) During preschool, I had trouble paying attention and sitting still and I liked to climb under the table during class. As a result, the school asked that I be tested again. This time, I was determined to be "border line for a diagnosis of autism." My parents were told that I could be given the diagnosis if they needed it to get me some therapy. They declined and said that they would find a way to get me what I needed.

Telling me that I had some "attention issues," my parents started sending me to a school psychologist who worked on academic issues, social issues and things like idioms, which were difficult for me to understand. I still saw the speech therapist and later I would add an occupational therapist for some fine motor and sensory integration problems as well as biofeedback to help increase my attention span. Although these therapists helped me a lot, I still experienced the world differently. For instance, I was sensitive to loud sounds and I couldn't stand the sound of chalk on a chalkboard, which made me want to vomit. I wasn't as social as other kids my age, and that concerned my parents. I was also slow at writing and I still had trouble paying attention. I was a smart kid, though, and with my parents' help, my grades were good.

Toward the end of fifth grade, however, things changed. The private Catholic school I went to decided that my parents helped me too much so they stopped sending work home. In an effort to get me ready for middle school, they also gave me less help at school. Feeling like I was being squeezed from both ends, my self-esteem plummeted and my resulting anger and confusion was expressed by bizarre behaviors. Clearly, I needed to move in a different direction, and thankfully, my parents recognized that. They pulled me out of that dreadful place halfway through fifth grade and my mother home-schooled me for the rest of the school year.

It was during home-schooling that I first heard the word "autism." By that time, I had the label of Asperger Syndrome, or high functioning autism, because I needed to work on social skills the most. Asperger, I was told, was the reason I had trouble paying attention and writing notes in class. When my parents and I first discussed these issues, I felt uncertain and scared. How would this affliction affect the rest of my life? I felt different and alone. Riddled with self-doubt, I started middle school at my local public school with trepidation. I had never been in a public school before. Would it be worse than private school, or better? How would they feel about a kid with a disability?

Well, it turned out that public school was a whole lot better than private school, at least for me. The teachers gave me extra help when I needed it and treated me like a person instead of a number. I developed techniques to help cope with Asperger Syndrome. One of those tips was to take time to analyze my situation carefully before I acted. Another was being the first one to talk to people.

In the beginning, I didn't have many friends, because I still felt like an outsider. One day, however, I spied two kids in wheelchairs in the lunch room. Surely, they would accept a kid with a disability as a friend because they were obviously disabled themselves. Justin and Zach Fellin became two of my best friends. They are twins with Asperger Syndrome and cerebral palsy, which confines them to wheelchairs. Zach is more severely afflicted. He has difficulty speaking and

he has to have someone feed him. I became one of his buddies, pushing him around at school and taking turns feeding him. I felt like a big shot at school as his helper and I loved every minute of it! They gave me a purpose and I was so grateful to them for it.

Justin and I developed an even closer bond. We hit it off right away because we both love music and computers. Justin's legs might not work but his personality is contagious. He is always upbeat and friendly and he even had a girlfriend! Maybe if he could enjoy life, so could I! We became inseparable. With them, I saw that almost anything was possible because they wouldn't let anyone or anything stop them. Being around Justin and Zach also made me realize how fortunate I am compared to them. Asperger was nothing compared to cerebral palsy. My attitude toward my disability changed. I was suddenly lucky and grateful instead of unlucky and angry.

Sadly, I parted ways with the Fellins during the first year of high school. We had different lunches and never got to see each other during the school day. At the end of our freshman year, a new school was built and they were zoned for it. This ended our close activities with each other, except for film camp during the summer. This past summer, Justin and I hosted "The Really, Really Late Show." I was the host of the show and Justin was my sidekick. The film was a hit and we were stars! We still get together occasionally and when we do, it's just like old times.

Without Justin and Zach, I was lost, but I filled the void somewhat with ROTC. It gave me a place to go at lunchtime and somewhere to belong. I joined the orienteering team and learned how to navigate in the woods as well as the rifle team where I learned how to shoot a gun. There were many opportunities for community service and I volunteered as much as I could. I started running and exercising and my body grew strong. Over the past three years, I've learned a lot from ROTC, including how to be a leader, how to increase my self-confidence and self-esteem and public speaking skills. Although I don't plan to join the military, I am grateful for all that ROTC has done for me.

During my first year in high school, I also applied to join the Florida Youth Council (FYC). For me, that group has been awesome! I've met other kids with disabilities who are becoming leaders in their communities and I'm learning how to be one, too. I've attended many conferences with the FYC and learned how to advocate for myself, structure my IEP, and come to terms with my disability. They have emphasized that I am a person first who, second, has a disability, instead of being a disabled person. They have helped me to believe that I can be anything I want to be if I'm willing to work hard enough to get there.

Currently I don't think so much about my disability. I know it's there but I don't worry about it like I used to. Since it doesn't affect me physically, I "hide" it as well as I can by thinking carefully about what I say and do to

others. I know now that it's okay to ask for help if I don't understand something and I try to do that. Socially, I've become much more outgoing, although I don't always act in a socially appropriate manner. If I was able to start my life over and choose a different disability to have, I'd stick with Asperger. In the grand scheme of things, it's not so bad and I guess I wouldn't be the person I am today without it.

This is My Life

Sara Romine

I've come a long way since I was 2 years old when my mom went to Romania to adopt me. The neglect and abuse I suffered in my orphanage caused a lot of problems for me. Developmentally I was at a 6 month old level and couldn't walk, talk or eat solid food. Specialists labeled me mentally retarded and didn't know if I would ever improve.

When I was in preschool, I still wasn't talking so I was placed in a Varying Exceptionalities class. My teachers doubted I would ever be able to be in a regular class. They told my mom "It wouldn't be fair to the normal kids or me." Thankfully, my mom didn't listen to their advice, and went through the Partners in Policymaking course where she found out about The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A.) and Inclusion.

After learning about our rights to an education in the least restrictive environment with the supports I would need to be successful, my mom insisted I attend regular kindergarten at my neighborhood school instead of a "special" school or a "special" class. I was one of the first kids in my county to be included, and I have been ever since.

While I was in elementary school, I still had significant learning challenges. When I was seven years old I participated in brain research. The P.E.T. scans proved that the neglect I suffered in my orphanage

affected the function in every area of my brain. This important research demonstrates the need for quality care during the first few years of a baby's life, as well as the importance of early intervention.

Throughout the years, I've had lots of labels . . . "Educable Mentally Handicapped," "Speech Apraxia Disorder," "Language & Speech Disorder," "Auditory Processing Disorder," "Sensory Integration Disorder," "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" and "Attachment Disorder."

Most recently, it's been "Specific Learning Disability," but I am NOT a label or a disorder. It's important that labels are used only to identify challenges and help find solutions to problems. Always think of the person FIRST . . . NEVER their label or disability first!

I have always attended all of my Individual Education Plan meetings, or as I like to call it, my IEP. My mom made sure that my rights to be a full partner in my education were respected by every team member. We always discussed my challenges as well as my options before we went to the IEP meeting and made sure that the therapies and supports I needed to be successful were included. After the meeting we both made sure my IEP was successfully implemented.

In middle school, my ESE teacher spent a lot of time teaching me how to be an independent learner and leader. But most of my teachers thought I couldn't make it in high school on the regular diploma track and recommended I switch to a special diploma. But NO, I

decided it would be best for me to stay on the regular high school diploma track and did not switch. Instead, I auditioned for a high school of the performing arts. It is very completive so I had to work extra hard to prepare for my audition, and was thrilled when I was accepted.

My dedication to my education paid off during my freshman year when I was invited into the National Honor Society! Although I passed the writing portion of The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), unfortunately with my learning disability, tests are extremely challenging for me. I did not pass the reading or math portion of the FCAT.

The principal didn't want me to stay at his school when he found out I failed FCAT. My mom and I tried to explain that I.D.E.A. protected my right to stay but he wouldn't listen. We contacted the Advocacy Center and after our attorney explained my rights and explained I.D.E.A. to my principal and the School Board attorney, they both agreed I could stay. But after the meeting, I thought about it and decided that I did not want to go to a school where I was not wanted, so I applied for the McKay scholarship and transferred to a private Christian school for the last 2 years of high school.

Looking back over the past fourteen years of school, I realize most of my teachers weren't ready for inclusion and didn't know how to teach a kid like me. There have been some frustrating days for everyone, especially me! But, now that I think about it, I'm glad I was included, because it made me try harder to keep

up. Plus, I have lots of great friends who helped me along the way. Being actively involved at all of my IEP meetings has helped me understand my rights and responsibilities and prepared me for my transition into adulthood.

After years of studying every night, working with my tutors, speech therapist, occupational therapist and continuous support from my family – I am proud to say that last May I graduated from high school with a regular diploma with high honors! This achievement would not have been possible without the accommodations at school and a lot of hard work.

I am now going to Polk State College, majoring in communications. My goal is to become the most effective advocate possible for myself and others with disabilities, as well as abandoned children around the world. I love going to college and can't believe that I almost let my fear of failure stop me from applying. For extra spending money, I also work part time as a hostess at a restaurant.

Over the past few years my mom and I talked about all of my guardianship options. I decided to keep my rights and not ask my mom to become my guardian. I still want her to advise me, especially when I make important decisions that affect my life, but I want to have the right to make all of the final decisions myself. A few months ago we attended the "Lighting the Way" workshop and talked again about the different levels of guardianship. I need help with my finances so I asked my mom to be a cosigner on my bank account.

I love sharing my story, and hope that I may inspire others to become more aware of their rights, stand of for themselves, work towards their goals and not be afraid to face all of life's transitions and challenges. I believe if we each work together with our family, friends and partners, we can make our dreams come true!

Through my Eyes

Josue Tapia Ortiz

Well, it's not easy to explain how I do things in my everyday life. I'm visually impaired (VI) and I live my life with a set of rules. The first rule is, if it smells bad it isn't right, no matter what it is. Second, if it doesn't feel right it isn't happening. And my third rule is, if it doesn't sound right, I'm not going. These are the three simple rules I follow that allow me to fulfill my everyday tasks. Let me tell you about the different tasks I do in a day through my eyes.

Crossing the Street

Oh, crossing the street. How I dread going to Walgreens around the corner. Sometimes I'd rather cough up a lung than get Nyquil. Goodness gracious, how annoying it is! First of all, whose idea was it to invent a hybrid car? Huh? They're like freaking ninjas on the road. Man, I have to walk to the light wait for the red light to cross the street, but then stop and listen because a road ninja might get me! In all seriousness, in Florida the have these platform-like things at the edge of a cross walk called truncated domes, also known as "braille for the feet," which allow me to feel where the end of the sidewalk is under my feet. It helps, but those ninjas still exsist!!!

Cooking

Well this is the most difficult of things to do when you're VI. How do I know when the food is done? How do I measure ingredients? Man, his food must be salty. These are things I usually hear when it comes to VI people in the kitchen. Well, first of all, there are measuring cups with labels on them for us to measure. Second, we know when the food is done when the smell of almost burnt is in the air . . . just kidding, just kidding. That sounds horrible doesn't it? You can imagine me inviting you for dinner and the food taste like charcoal. Ha! Eat at your own risk. Naha, but seriously us VI people have lots of ways of cheating when it comes to cooking. First of all, we have the rice cooker. Never burn rice, woot woot! Heck yeah. Second we have the conventional oven, all we need is a label on 350 and 400 degrees and bam Digiorno pizza! Third, and the best part, we have frozen fully cooked meat. God bless Tyson's meat company. Because of them we have everything from fully cooked burgers to Buffalo wings. No need to get burned. (Even though by some act of fate it still happens.)

Washing Clothes and Picking What to Wear

It's kind of funny, but to me it's the easiest task of them all. Even though I'm color blind and I don't wear a lot of bright colors doesn't mean I can't wash. Man, I just take the easy way out on that one. Dump it all in with some cold water no delicates, some Tide or Gain and bam, clothes are washing. Same with drying

the clothes. Label the 30 minute mark on the knob and bam clothes are drying. Check periodically of course.

Now picking what to wear is a whole different story. Color blindness doesn't help during a blind date. (Ha, I made a pun!) You imagine going on date with a green shirt, some red shorts and some black socks? Though interesting, no one wants to date the Skittles bag. Ok? My way to solve this problem goes all the way to the way I shop for clothes. For every one pair of jeans I buy, I also buy three to four shirts that go with those pair of jeans. And so on. This is my way of coping with my color limitation, but I can easily label the tag in Braille with the first letter of its color, but where is the adventure in that?

Dating

What can I say? It's one of the hardest things to do when you have disability. It's especially scary to me because I feel like a girl might think that I find her boring and that I am falling asleep. This is due to the fact that my eyes are always semi-closed. Having a disability does have its perks too. I have this keen thing of memorizing the scent of perfume and shampoos. (To make a long story short, I was blind and have 6 sisters, trust me, I know.) The majority of girls enjoy when guys compliment their perfume or shampoo. Well not so much the shampoo. Also I have this little habit of noticing mannerisms of people. Like if she does her hair. Girls have a habit of raising their voice just tad and keep their upper body very stiff like their hair is going

to fall of because they're trying to get a compliment. It's funny. It's like if she's moving like a robot and she smells good, it's a done deal baby. . . . Wait, that came out wrong. . . .

Pranks

Well being part or the disabled community, you kind of get looked at under a magnifying glass. You hear these whispers as if they think we are deaf. "Wow look at him, why is he holding that stick? Is something wrong with him? Why does eat the menu when he reads it?" You know what? I can hear you!!!! I'm not deaf, but hey it pays to push the bar sometimes. One time a couple of my VI friends and I went to the mall to see a movie. When we were waiting in line to get our tickets we couldn't help but hear a lady mumbling to her kid and husband "I wonder if they know they're standing in a line?" Well this kind of bothered me and my friends so after we got our tickets we walked to the center of the lobby and just stood there for about two minutes, just waiting for the right moment for our scene. (Oh yes, I wasn't only making a scene, but me and my friends were going to make a Broadway musical!) There were about fifteen people around us, so what we did was, each of us stood in front of each other (there were four of us by the way), looked at each other eye to eye then yelled at the top of our lungs. "It's time for a duel!" Then we all pulled out our collapsible canes and started swiping at each other like they were swords. We kept yelling "The force is strong

with this one!" but just as fast as we began the scene we just stopped and put our canes away and walked into the movie theater like nothing happened. Man, can you imagine the thoughts running through that lady's head now? Hahahahaha, serves her right!!!! Woot woot!

The Rollercoaster that is My Life

Sarah York

I don't know about the rest of you but "I love roller coasters!" They're so fast and the ups and downs just make for such a fun thrill ride. Sometimes it's a disappointment when you have to get off. The head rush and experience is over. In 1999 I got on a roller coaster that sometimes, I think to this very day, I'm still on, riding the ups and downs. And unlike regular roller coasters, I never know which way this one is going to go or when I'll get off.

I thought I was your run of the mill teenager. I didn't know there was something wrong with me or that I was about to start the ride of my life. I'd been having some behavior problems in school and for some reason I can't remember my mom decided to take me to the doctor. My doctor put me on Prozac. Prozac is where it all started, because I later found out Prozac is not good for people like me. There was an incident at school and in a fight or flight response I did something that I'd never done before. That night my parents took me to the ER to be "mentally evaluated," as it's called. Terry checked me out and said there was nothing medically she could do and referred me to Dr. Solloway. Well that was on a Tuesday. That Sunday I started my obsession with knives, or to put it simply "cutting."

I was in the backseat of my mom's car holding a knife as she drove back to the ER. We got there and she ran inside to find Terry, and yelled "See, I told you something was wrong!" Terry came out to the parking lot where I'd locked myself in the car and told me to come out of the car. "I don't want to get out, the cops are going to come" I said. "If you don't get out and come with me then yeah, they're going to come." So I got out of the car and went with Terry and started on my first of many psychiatric hospitalizations I would experience in the coming years.

After seeing Dr. Solloway for awhile he diagnosed me with a behavior disorder and started me on medication. Months and many more hospitalizations went by and in November of that year I was given a new diagnosis: BIPOLAR DISORDER. Okay I have the correct diagnosis. Yeah! But now what? Now I started toward the new hurdle of trying to find the right cocktail of medication. Have you heard the phrase "different strokes for different folks?" Well that's kind of what it's like when you're trying to figure out what medication works for you. My doctor and I tried multiple things. It just seemed like nothing worked. The medicine either had horrible side effects, or it would send me into a manic state, or I refused to take it all together. This would go on for months at a time, or even a year would pass 'til we thought we had the right mixture. During this time I was still having problems at school, to where I got kicked out of the high school and put on hospital home bound.

At this point I want to fast forward to November 2000. I was in and out of the hospital and was being released after being admitted the night before. That night I was admitted, and I got in a fight with security and ended up spraining my ankle and was put on crutches. So I was being discharged and they sent me home with a new prescription to fill. Mom and I had to go home so I could get my stuff for Grandma's since I would be staying with her while they went to the Grand Canyon. After I got my stuff from home, we went to the pharmacy to fill the prescription. I stayed in the car while she went inside to fill it. Well there was a bottle of water in the car and the Tegretol sitting right next to me. The thoughts going through my head were that mom and dad hated me, and they wouldn't care if I was gone. So with those thoughts I took somewhere around 25 Tegretols. It took about an hour for the drugs to start kicking in. When we got to Grandma's house I went to get out of the car and tried to stand up using the crutches and I just collapsed with my left ankle turning sideways. All I could do was crawl on the rock hard concrete of the driveway. I must have blacked out because the only other thing I remember was mom yelling at me to get the fuck up and crawling to the bathroom inside the house. I was transported to the hospital in an ambulance where I was administered charcoal and put in the PICU.

My doctor came and saw me a day or so later and said he was transferring me upstairs to the psych unit. I will never forget this one nurse in the PICU because she

was the definition of stigma that day. I kept telling her that my ankle hurt and that it was sprained but she kept saying it was fine and told me to stop whining. I wish that when I found out that I had torn the ligaments in my ankle, I could have gone back to that nurse and said "See I may be a crazy chick but my ankle was messed up!" (I ended up having ligament reconstruction on my ankle in 2001.) Dr. Solloway kept me on the unit for about a week this time and switched me to two medications that have worked so well I'm still on them today. So in 2001 I received the McKay scholarship for people with disabilities and started going to Center Academy. I'd finally caught a break. I was going to a good school, wasn't hospital home bound anymore and was on the right medication. Center Academy was like a God send; there was no stigma. There was one on one attention from the teacher. It was small classrooms and nobody judged one another. Center Academy was an elementary middle and high school all in one. It was broken up into three rooms. Each grade had a teacher's assistant and a teacher who was able to teach every grade. So I was there for eleventh and twelfth grade. Mrs. Iyobe was my teacher for both years and whenever I needed help with schoolwork I could just go to her desk and shed help me. There was no changing classes. She was the teacher I had for every subject. No ringing bells or even lockers, just one huge classroom with classmates that might be in a different grade than you but sat right next to you. Those were good days, and when you became a senior you got

more privileges, like you could do your work outside and leave the building for lunch. In 2003, when I was a graduating senior my family and I were so happy. I was going to get a regular diploma, not a special diploma. With a regular diploma that meant that I could go to college if I wanted to. Center Academy had opened up a whole new world for me and it was a blast. Without the McKay scholarship I never would have had the opportunity to wear a cap and gown, and I enjoyed that experience. The only thing I guess I missed from not being at a normal high school was that we didn't have a prom, which I wish I could have had.

In 2003 I started attending a support group for people with depression, bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses. DBSA OR depression bipolar support alliance is a group that meets every Sunday evening, and the youngest person who attended was forty. But DBSA Jax Beaches was the only group in the area for consumers, and let use the word "peer" instead of consumer. So at age 18 there was nothing for my age where someone could get together and talk about what was bothering them or how their illness was affecting their high school or college life. Instead I went to a group where people were discussing how their children don't understand or their spouse is hard to deal with when they're manic. For a couple of years I went to DBSA on a weekly basis and I was the only one under the age of forty there. I got a lot out of the weekly meetings but there was still that need to talk with other people going through some of the same kind

of problems as me. I got together with other people in the group and started trying to develop a young adults group. The requirements were that you had to find a sponsor within the mental health community, such as a doctor or a therapist, you had to find a place, day and time to meet that would be good for your target audience, and there was a fifty dollar fee. It wasn't as hard as I thought to get everything met. I found out that the hard part was finding the people and getting them to come back. The phrase "if you build it they will come" was not true in this instance. There would be weeks when I was the only one there. Every week I would go, just hoping people would show. I kept at it for a year and my best turnout was ten people one night which I guess is good for a new group. After that first year I and some of the members of the elder group decided we would keep the group going for another year as a sub chapter, just in case people in need would show, and if they didn't I could just attend the other group. Also, with the encouragement of a friend who is a member of the adult group, I decided to run for president of DBSA Jacksonville Beaches. I was elected president and enjoyed seeing myself learn and grow during my presidency.

Currently I'm working at Wal-Mart as a People Greeter or as my mom likes to call me: A Purple People Eater. This is my third job. I've also worked at Marble Slab Creamery for a couple of months, and then after that I worked at Target for a year. I also volunteer on the board of my local NAMI (National Alliance for the

Mentally Ill). I am no longer involved with DBSA, but I still attend every once in a while as a group member. I am involved with Toastmasters, a speaking club to improve one's speaking skills. I enjoy that very much and it allows me to be very creative. I have written speeches on video games, myself and vampires. My next speech is titled "Funny Farm" and details some of my stays in the psychiatric ward. Can't wait to find out what the members of the club think of that one.

Well my life truly has been a roller coaster and I don't think I shall be getting off anytime soon. I imagine we all are on our own type of roller coaster. I will continue to take the up with the downs, or should I say the good with the bad. And whenever the ride comes to a halt, I guess it will be time to get off, but for now I am going to just enjoy the ride.



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