

Discovering Me

I have had to overcome many challenges as a result of my mobility disability that requires me to use a motorized wheelchair to function as a community ambulator and forearm crutches to walk shorter distances. Some of my early challenges were significant such as taking my first steps with my forearm crutches. All were hard-won victories, the result of many hours of practice, such as when I finally walked down the entire length of the beach and bounded into the ocean, canes and all! Even learning to do a K-turn in my wheelchair was the result of many tedious tries. These obstacles, and my experiences overcoming them, helped to shape my resilience and character. I later learned that they also prepared me for the biggest obstacle I needed to face, one that will present itself to me for the rest of my life. The most significant challenge I have had to overcome was accepting that I will always have a mobility disability and will always need some type of assistance for my everyday survival. I have had to learn how to accept myself and my disability and understand that I need to continually choose what is necessary and best for me in all situations, whether it is using my wheelchair, my crutches or relying on a helping hand. This realization did not really hit home for me until I started college.

In 2015, I started Cornell University and was initially impressed by the magnificent rolling hills and natural beauty of the campus. However, as a student, these hills became my greatest physical challenge. In the beginning of my first semester, I bought a motorized chair because friends with disabilities had told me that college-life would be very demanding and having better mobility would make it easier to become more independent. I was reluctant because I had always used forearm crutches in school and was worried about how my professors and peers and would view me if I was seated in a wheelchair. I also was concerned about how my physicality would be affected if I did not have ample time to exercise, especially since up

until this point, I had gotten most of my stretching and exercise from walking throughout the day. I decided to use my wheelchair for getting to and from classes, but I still used my canes for social situations and downtime as much as possible. This seemed like a good solution for the first few weeks, but as my schoolwork and social life became more demanding, I realized that something needed to change. I was often too tired to commit to inviting social scenes and it took so much longer to do things throughout the day that I had to stay up late into the night to finish my schoolwork. I did not want my college experience, something that I had worked so hard to achieve, to suffer because of my own stubbornness. I decided to use the wheelchair full-time on campus and find other ways to enhance my physical activity. This decision helped me to succeed in my college career and opened up new opportunities that I could only have dreamed of when I began.

Once I became a “student who uses a wheelchair,” my college life improved dramatically. Getting into my wheelchair became a part of my daily routine and the chair and tray became a part of me. By the end of the first semester, I not only began to consistently rely on the chair as an active student, I welcomed it. I was able to navigate across the campus on my own and became responsible for my own belongings and my own space. This afforded me a level of independence I never had on my crutches. Social interactions, while still challenging, also became easier and I was able to accept more invitations and integrate more easily. My confidence soared. I became a member of the Dean’s Advisory Council where I presented curriculum proposals to faculty members. I joined the Golden Key Honor society and participated in fundraising activities on campus. For exercise, I took swimming and boxing classes and joined the Wheelchair Ballroom Dance Club. For someone who was fearful of being left on the sidelines, I became part of the fabric of Cornell.

One of my greatest accomplishments is an academic one, as I was accepted to Oxford University as a visiting student for my junior year abroad. The world is full of magnificent opportunities and I am grateful to be able to participate in my adventures. I am excited and honored to be able to study alongside some of the world's leading experts in History, including those studying the History of Disabilities. Choosing my wheelchair was a turning point of my academic and social journey and played an integral part in my own self-reflection. I learned that it is not about what mobility aides I use, but how I view myself, feel, and behave while I am using them. My wheelchair is only an aide. It does not define who I am or what I accomplish. Acceptance of myself is what leads to acceptance of me by others. My revelation was in finally understanding the meaning for me of the motto of Saint Francis de Sales, "Be who you are, and be that well." My self-acceptance means that I choose who I am, and what I want to be and become. To take action and "be that well," I need my wheelchair for assistance now and probably in the future. I now see past my aides and focus on my dreams. I realize that I was not searching for anyone else's approval, I was discovering my own.