

What would you do if your entire life changed in the snap of a finger? Most of us would not like the idea of this; in fact, it scares us. Often change happens through no choice of our own. As for me, I was thirteen when a life changing event occurred. I was going through my typical weekend playing a baseball game when I experienced the most excruciating pain in my head. Moments later I collapsed, then heard the roar of sirens. Now, this created a lot of challenges instantly, the first being the fact that I might not live. With less than a one percent chance, I awoke three weeks later in a hospital room full of family and doctors. They told me I had suffered a stroke caused by an aneurysm from an undiagnosed congenital malformation in my brain. As a thirteen-year-old, I had no idea what that meant or even what was going on. I was paralyzed on the left side of my body and a tube up my nose. I remember crying every night to my mom, asking “Why did this happen to me? What did I ever do to deserve this?” I spent the next eight weeks in the hospital, enduring hours of physical, occupational and speech therapies. Thankfully, I was able to regain enough movement in my left leg to walk out of the hospital.

Going back to school was by far the hardest thing I have ever done, and I had multiple brain surgeries, so that is saying a lot. I went back to school just four months after my stroke, the beginning of my eighth-grade year. Kids are still very immature in middle school. They had no idea how to react. Before the stroke, I was one of the popular kids, athletic and an honor roll student. Now, I am walking into school a completely different person. I was made fun of for limping and not being able to use my body as well as being called numerous names. I lost a lot of friends which made me just not want to go to school. Additionally, the teachers had no idea how to help since having a stroke at such a young age is so rare. I also missed a lot of school because I was going back to Children’s Hospital almost every day for therapy. The combination of missing school and the teachers not understanding how to support my academic challenges, caused my grades to plummet.

Life did not get any easier when I started high school. I continued to be made fun daily and the teachers provided little to no help. I was upset with the fact my grades were so bad

because I didn't understand the curriculum. The stroke caused not only left-sided hemiparesis but also cognitive deficits that made it difficult to read, organize my thoughts, and comprehend. After three miserable years of fighting the school system, struggling in every single one of my classes, and destined for failure, my family and I made the decision to transfer schools. I left the few friends I had and the big, public school for a small private school, in an effort to turn my life around. Once I transferred, I instantly saw change. Not only was the entire school welcoming but everyone was so nice. I was not judged because of how I walked or for what happened to me. After I removed the negative energy, I became motivated and excited to wake up every day and go to school. The best thing to come from changing schools, apart from actually having friends, was how helpful the teachers were. Each teacher was willing to sit down with me, one-on-one outside of class, to make sure I understood the assignments. My grades improved, even with the pandemic debacle. It was just unfortunate it took half of my high school years to discover a solution and what I needed to succeed.

Another challenge I have faced is getting back to the sport I love, baseball. The doctors told me I would never play competitive baseball again. I could not accept that so I started working out with my old baseball trainer. It took four years of hard work, but I made it back as the starting pitcher my senior year of high school. I even pitched a perfect game, a truly amazing experience!

Surviving a stroke and putting my life back together has caught the attention of a lot of people within the stroke community. I was asked to participate in a short documentary based on my recovery. People that watched the video and listened to my interviews have said that I inspire them every day. At this point instead of thinking I was unlucky to have a stroke I kind of feel the opposite. I am happy because being a stroke survivor is so much bigger. I can actually inspire and help others overcome and even thrive after a life changing event.

Now all I want to do is help others see the light, I want to be their living proof that life does get better. I would never want any other kid to have to struggle like I did or even question if

they should keep waking up every day. I will do everything in my power to help kids with brain injuries, learning deficits, and other problems that may make school challenging. I chose special education teaching as my major to ensure I can help these kids succeed academically. I recently had the opportunity to shadow a special education teacher at a local elementary school. I was able to help a young boy with autism complete an assignment. I was so excited and congratulated him on the accomplishment. His face lit up with the biggest smile I had ever seen. The immediate satisfaction of knowing I was able to help him understand and maybe even have a small impact on his life is what made me fall in love with special education.

I also hope to become a motivational speaker so that I can share my story and how I overcame adversity to achieve not only academic success but also to play competitive baseball again. I want people to see what comes with hard work and determination. Through public speaking, I can also raise awareness for strokes and brain arteriovenous malformation.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story. Your scholarship will not only help me pursue my education but also make a difference in the world for younger generations.