

I am five years old. Pink and purple hair clips, a pink shirt, pants with pink daisies, and funny looking leg braces complete today's outfit. I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of two and my leg braces kept my legs in the proper alignment so my walking could improve. Leg braces did not go with the current kindergarten fashion trends and I felt the eyes of my classmates looking at me and my awkward gait. I reach for the velcro straps and try to take them off before my mom sees, but to my dismay, my mom seemed to have eyes in the back of her head. At that moment, she looked up from the sink, and shook her head fervently. It was like she was communicating telepathically with me, *You cannot take them off your feet*. I looked at her, and groaned, almost rolling my eyes but stopping myself. "Do I *have* to wear them? I'm uncomfortable." I pleaded. "You can take them off when you get home." She promised. And with that, my mom drove me to school to face another day of kindergarten. Leg braces and all.

Kindergarten marked the year of my first orthopedic surgery, and it also was also the year that I developed an insatiable appetite for learning. My teacher, Ms. Reingold always made a point to include me in class activities. She was the person who showed me our class bookshelf. I devoured her copies of *Cat in the Hat*, *The Giving Tree*, and many more. As my appetite for learning grew I was placed in talented and gifted classes at my elementary school. Miss Reingold even awarded me the coveted class leader award which encompassed my willingness to learn and kindness shown to my classmates. From that point on, I knew that school was where I could excel.

I glanced at the clock and watched the seconds tick by as I finished my upteenth physical therapy session. The past seven years had been a blur and I was eager to leave them behind in the pages of my journal as I wrote about the hard times I had endured. From bullying to a second failed orthopedic surgery, my body had been through the ringer. “Two more leg raises and then we’re done,” My physical therapist told me. I looked down at the scars at my feet. *They remind me of what I have been through.* “Times up!” My therapist said while looking at her watch. The sweat on my brow was proof of how hard I worked, and I would be back again tomorrow.

The feeling of doing physical therapy for more than ten years is hard to articulate. I would get frustrated wanting to do other things like other kids.

Between physical therapy appointments, recovery from surgeries and school, I was surrounded by sports. My parents were college athletes. My older sister, Ally, played soccer and volleyball. While watching, I thought, *I want to do that!* My mom soon had me try adaptive soccer, rock climbing, and kayaking. Whatever I wanted to try, my parents said, “You can do it!” As I tried all of these sports and watched my sister’s soccer games as she ran around the soccer field, I felt like something was missing.

This is when my mom suggested adaptive track and field. The first thing I did was laugh. Not at her, but at the idea of running. That was something my sister could do, not me. “I don’t think I can run mom!”

“Just try it. I think you’ll like it.” Mom was right, I loved it. My first adaptive track and field practice opened up a world of possibilities. I stood on the track

surrounded by people that were like me. I finally felt seen. I spent my high school years competing around the country and around the world in track and field. I was named a US Paralympic High School All American three times. I was selected to represent the United States in Spain, England and Thailand, and was selected as the female Positive Athlete in Georgia while maintaining a straight A average in school. I started to become more comfortable in my own skin because of sports and began to volunteer with cerebral palsy organizations as an advisor, speaker and disability advocate.

Defying expectations and the odds that face students with disabilities, I was accepted to the University of Michigan, one of the top public universities in the world and I'm proud to say I am their first female adaptive athlete in history! I major in political science and want to continue on to law school focusing on disability advocacy.

Additionally, I serve on the University of Michigan Disability Student Advisory Board, and am a research assistant in the University of Michigan Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Department. I am very passionate about using my voice to help people with physical disabilities like me, especially women, and hope my experiences can help others feel less alone and hopeful about their own futures. I've had the opportunity to be featured in two books including *The Positive Athlete -100 Inspiring Stories*, and *Pure Grit – Role Models in Physical Disability*. I want to continue my advocacy work as a lawyer who represents children with physical disabilities because I know how important it is that children are represented and protected.

As an out of state student, attending the University of Michigan is extremely expensive, however I wanted to pursue my dream of attending this elite institution and having the opportunity to be the university's first female adaptive athlete. This scholarship would help lighten the financial burden for me and my family and help me continue to pursue my dreams.

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