

ABSTRACT

“Rethinking Disabilities: A Collection of Short Stories”

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Director: Ginger Hanchey, Ph.D.

Our world is obsessed with normal, but it is also fascinated with the anomalous. We go through our day to day lives and forget how blessed we are with our bodies, our minds, our functions. In these four stories, I explore what is considered to be outside the realm of normal. Disabilities are stereotyped in our world filled with judgments. The goal of these short stories is to portray people living with disabilities as *people*. It is simple. No one knows how to interact with someone who has Down syndrome, probably because they do not understand it. Through working at a camp for people with different abilities, I learned that the differences are minimal. Physically we may be different, but we are all human.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ginger Hanchey". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr. Ginger Hanchey, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

A solid horizontal line, likely intended for a signature or stamp.

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

RETHINKING DISABILITIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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By

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PREFACE

When I began this process of writing my honors thesis, I was at a loss for what I wanted to write about for the project. As I started exploring my passions and interests, I found that my love for serving and knowing people with disabilities outshined most everything else. I also have a passion and love for writing, so I decided to combine my passions. The first chapter was easier than expected. In my Creative Non-Fiction class with Dr. DePalma, I discovered how I wanted to begin my thesis. My experiences with people who have differently able bodies allows me to view them in a perspective that I wish everyone could possess. When I see a man with Down syndrome, I see beauty. When I see a young girl in a wheelchair, I rejoice that she is able to live life. My hope for those who read these short stories is for their eyes to be opened to a new world view of people living with disabilities. I want people to realize that just because someone has an extra chromosome or one less arm or leg does not make them any less of a person. There is a special beauty inside of every human. We just have to remove the judgment and open minds to new views of people.

While writing my stories, my creative process came from reading other short stories on disabilities. I explored the Kaleidoscope issue on SCRIBD, which publish many stories on difficulties with disability. I also read a few stories on Short Story Guide. These stories helped me with structure and concepts. However, most of my material was derived from personal experiences and real people in my life. I wanted my writing to not necessarily fit any specific conventions of short story writing. Rather, I

desired for my stories to come from my heart and from a longing for people to understand disabilities in a different way.

STORY ONE

The phone rang and buzzed on my desk. Wow, my ringtone is obnoxious. I stopped whatever miniscule task I was doing in that moment and looked at the screen. Call from Missouri? Suddenly I was overwhelmed with mixed emotions. I wonder if it's about me coming back to be on staff again next summer. I would love to go back. It's the closest place to Heaven on earth that I have ever experienced. Or maybe it's Sarah calling about a camper parent complaint... gosh I sure hope it's not that. I mean we did our best for every camper. I guess it could be a camp friend whose number I must not have saved. Intrigued I answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Emily Runnels?”

“Yes mam, this is she. How may I help you?”

“Well Ms. Runnels, I am calling about Cassie— “

“Mom, I am not going to some camp where I have to wipe someone else's butt and stuff! That's gross. Besides, what could I do for any of them? I'm just 16 years old.”

My mom packed up my bags. She then proceeded to put them and my bratty self into the car. I was incredibly frustrated. This is summer! I was supposed to be laying out by the pool getting tan, or going to Six Flags with my friends, or laying around watching TV—not going to middle-of-nowhere Missouri to a camp for people with disabilities. I guess the reason I signed up to go in the first place was because all of my friends from church were going. I had to do some kind of service if I was going to

continue being a “good, church girl.” I’m not saying I don’t believe in God. I just feel like I need to keep showing I believe on the outside, and maybe, hopefully, that can help my inside.

Mom wanted me to go probably because it had been a rough time for me lately. Maybe I needed an attitude check. I was isolated, sad, upset with my life... but I still don’t understand why I had to go to this camp. I was going to serve others, not to be served. So, Mom, what are you thinking?

To be honest, I was actually scared. No. I was completely terrified. I’ve never helped anyone in a wheelchair. Heck, I’ve never even touched a wheelchair. Yet, here I am going to a camp that specializes in helping people who need wheelchairs. Oh and did I mention... this week is literally called: “Wheelchair Week?” Yeah. I have nothing against people in wheelchairs or people with disabilities. I just don’t think I can relate to them. What could we have in common?

In hindsight, I think the reason that I was so afraid is because I felt inadequate and broken. How could one broken person help another broken person? Spiritually I was struggling. I was unsure why God had allowed me to feel so many negative thoughts about myself. Why He would let me feel like such a mistake? I guess at the time I didn’t understand that the feeling that I had in my gut was that I was a hypocrite. For me to go to this camp in the broken state that I was in seemed wrong. I knew my job entailed helping my camper with whatever she needed, whether that be bathing, toileting, getting dressed, brushing teeth, oh and then understanding the Gospel. I think, deep down, that was the kicker. I could not come to terms with the idea of some spiritually dry, 16-year-

old girl explaining God's love and flawlessness to someone that He placed in a wheelchair. Little did I know that there was a totally different plan in store for me.

We arrived at camp. I was impressed with it instantly. This place was not your typical camp, like everyone kept reminding me. It was founded in 1996, and it began as a camp for people with cancer. But soon, it became a place where different was normal. I quickly found out that Extreme Home Makeover actually renovated the entire camp so that it could cater to the needs of all campers. A camp is supposed to be lame cabins, bugs everywhere, crappy beds, awful food, and unfortunate looking buildings. The concrete roads twisted all through the camp (I suppose for the wheelchairs to get around they couldn't have gravel roads). The trees canopied over the pathways, so looking up was inevitable. The crazy humidity made anyone's straightened hair frizz up as soon as it came into contact with the camp air. The cabins were air conditioned, with wooden bunk beds, huge showers, and nice floors. What kind of place is this? I remember one of the staffers saying that the camp motto was "changing lives through disability ministry." I figured that made sense considering it is a Christian camp for people with disabilities or chronic illnesses; however, I never expected that it could actually change my life.

A lot happened in between me arriving at Camp Barnabas for the first time and me meeting Cassie. I dare not bore anyone with the summary of those events. So, I will just fast forward to the moments that changed my life.

The disabilities in our cabin were diverse. Kristen was blind and in a wheelchair. She would always ask for us to describe things that were going on around us. I remember one time I accidentally dropped a notebook, and Kristen immediately yelped in

shock. "What the heck was that!?" Oh, Kristen. She continually made me laugh. Marci couldn't speak or use her hands properly, but that never stopped her from interacting to the best of her ability. The notes that she would write to each of us were filled with intelligence and love. On the last day of camp, Marci handed me a folded up note (folded herself) that simply said: "I love you, Emily." Definitely hanging that one on my wall at home. Christa's bones were too fragile for her to even walk on them. However, she had a secret talent. Christa was an artist. She drew and painted beautiful butterflies that honestly had just as much color as her personality.

Then there was Cassie. At first I was scared to look at her. Her electric wheelchair was bigger than me. Any time I talked to her I would have to tilt my head up slightly just to make genuine eye contact. Cassie was young, maybe around 24 years old. I don't know her exact diagnosis, but it was definitely the worst in our cabin. She was paralyzed from the neck down. Her entire body no longer moved. She could move her eyes and mouth... meaning that she could turn her eyes towards whoever was speaking and then reply. Every day she would have to be lifted by a machine to get her out of bed, into bed, on the toilet, off the toilet. It took about four of us to get her into the lift. One time I remember watching the staffers and two other volunteers try and take her to the bathroom to change. Two people would grab under her arms, and the other two would take her legs. It took so many motions, and they all seemed to blur together. See, Cassie was too much of a sweetheart to tell anyone if something was wrong, but sometimes I could catch a glimpse of her wincing at the uncomfortableness that she was experiencing. It was too hard to watch sometimes. I felt completely helpless when it came to helping

Cassie. I can't imagine the level of awkwardness that she must have been feeling when people were helping her. To not be able to move at all, and to have to completely trust strangers must have been terrifying. Mentally, Cassie was all there. She was smart from what I could tell. The way that she would explain her disability showed intelligence. The way she had coherent, meaningful conversations with anyone who would talk to her demonstrated her love for people. The way she would give sassy comments when she disagreed with someone or got frustrated displayed her realness. But still... I was too scared to look at her sometimes. I felt so guilty.

Throughout my life I had this overarching thought that being “well” or “whole” or “blessed” meant having a good God-loving family, being in a Christ-centered community, having the ability to worship freely, and being healthy physically. Now, that last one I hadn't truly considered for a while. Why was having a fully functioning body considered a blessing in our society? If I was in line at a grocery store wearing a silly hat with unicorns on it, and a man with Down syndrome was standing in front of me, the people passing by wouldn't be staring at my ridiculous hat. Why is his face that way? Why does he talk funny? A child would stare, and his father would look to him and say, “Stop staring. That is rude.” But, I have a feeling that if the boy had been staring at me, the father wouldn't have thought twice. This idea of people with disabilities being so abnormal was implanted at such a young age. Camp Barnabas helped me understand that “normal” is not a standard that should ever be considered. Because, honestly, what is normalcy?

One day during devos (devotionals), we were talking about things we wished God could tell us. Questions that we needed answers to. "Why did God make me like this?" That was the question that received a unanimous vote. Most of these women were young and never understood why they had to suffer through losing certain abilities. So, we all expected that kind of question. The vote was unanimous. Almost unanimous. Cassie disagreed. All eyes turned towards her.

"Well, then what the heck would you ask Him then?" One of the other campers asked her almost without hesitation. Cassie shifted her eyes towards the ceiling as if she was looking to Heaven.

"I know the answer to that question already. I was made broken on the outside, so that I could help people who are broken on the inside."

The cabin was silent. No one knew how to respond. I mean how could anyone really reply to that statement. So profound. So confident. It was a belief that I had never even considered. In church we are taught that trials make us stronger, blah, blah, blah. But in our world, people do not view brokenness as a strength. It's the survival of the fittest. So for Cassie to state this belief so boldly, honestly just stunned me.

Suddenly, I felt a lump in my throat. Oh, no. Words were making their way up and out. "Cassie, that's cool that you feel that way. But are you happy living like this? Would you want God to fix you?" I immediately regretted speaking. Now she is going to be sad and cry, and it will be all my fault for not controlling my stupid word vomit.

Her eyes fixated on me. I felt like a deer in headlights. Those deep, beautifully green eyes pierced my soul as she spoke truth into me. Truth that I had never faced before.

“Now why on earth would I want that? I don’t need my body to be fixed. My heart has already been healed. I am happy with how my God made me. You know why?” She paused, and I listened with anticipation. It was as if everyone else in our cabin was gone. It was just me and Cassie.

“Because if I wasn’t made this way, then I wouldn’t be able to share His love in the unique way that I can. The way I see it, if I can love a God who created me like this, then surely people who don’t have to be lifted everywhere can too,” she said with a slight giggle.

As she spoke to us, tears fell from my eyes. Conviction hit me over the head harder than a brick. This conversation was completely contradictory to this concept I had of a “blessed” life. Here I was... a privileged, young girl blessed with a perfectly functioning body, but a seriously messed up view of myself, God, and the people I thought I was so different from. On one hand I related to my other campers because to be honest I don’t like how God made me. I constantly wish He had made me skinnier, prettier, funnier... I struggle so much with loving who He created me to be. On the other hand, I relate to Cassie because I want to be where she is at in her relationship with God and her view on the world. Why can’t I be more accepting of who I am? Why can’t I think like Cassie?

Cassie and I grew closer over the next few days. Most of the activities that we did, Cassie was unable to do them (so much for a camp catered to their abilities). So I sat on the side, and we would just talk. We would park her wheelchair over in the shade underneath the beautifully canopied trees, and her and I would have a blast. One time we played "I Spy," and she would always choose the most difficult thing to spot, like a specific button on her chair. Sometimes we'd even discuss the Bible and God. Other times we would just laugh about the most random things. Hairless cats. We laughed about those for what seemed like forever. Laughing with Cassie never got old. When she would smile, which was difficult for her because of her disability, it was impossible to look away. I guess I finally got over my fear of staring at her, because honestly, I saw Jesus when she smiled. She was beautiful; her eyes were a deep green and were never hidden because her brown hair was short and kept out of her face. It has never been more clear. Truthfully, I had never seen it before... that joy, that pure joy. She had that thing that everyone in the world craves and desires. Joy. Cassie and I truly bonded during that week. She helped me come to terms with being content with how God made me. She helped me find happiness in the smallest things. And I found something at camp that when I got there I did not think I would find at all; I found a friend in Cassie and the other campers in my cabin. We connected in ways only friends could, and I grew to love each of them in a special way. Not in a volunteer/camper way, but in an almost sisterly way. I never thought that would happen.

This week was my first of six more weeks as a volunteer. One week each summer for six years. Then I went on to be on staff because I believe that that place and

‘those people’ change lives. I have had amazing experiences with hundreds of campers over the years. All of which have helped shape who I am today. From helping me have incredible patience to showing me genuine joy, the campers that I have known have changed me for the better. But Cassie... Cassie was the one who picked me up, turned me towards the Lord, then gave me one huge push. I went home from that week during that summer, and I felt a significant change in my heart. I no longer wanted to be sad or isolated. I desired the joy that overflowed in Cassie. When I smiled, I wanted Jesus to be seen just like I saw Him in Cassie’s unforgettable smile. I still struggle with loving myself the way that I was created, but ever-so often Cassie’s tender voice whisper to me: “It’s okay to be broken, and God made you like this for a reason.” I doubt my life would be where it is if Cassie hadn’t been a part of it for that one week. I am forever grateful to that amazing woman for showing me that being different doesn’t make you special and normal is not a standard to live by; but accepting who you are and how you were made and living in a way that displays God’s love, that’s what makes you special.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Emily Runnels?”

“Yes mam, this is she. How may I help you?”

“Well, Ms. Runnels, I am calling about Cassie. She was in your cabin at Camp Barnabas a few years back. I’m her mother.”

“Yes! Cassie! It’s so nice to hear from you. Wow I miss that smile. How is she?”

“Emily— “

I don't remember what she said. It didn't matter.

Cassie was dead.

STORY TWO

I was grocery shopping at our local grocery store, Tom Thumb. Usually when I go get my typical list mixed with a good 60% junk food and 40% produce, I see people from the neighborhood. Sometimes I will go out of my way to say hello, sometimes I just avoid any contact with people besides the cashier. On this particular day the line was quite long, longer than usual. As we were all standing there with our filled or half-filled baskets ready to get home and do anything else, I noticed a strange interaction.

A young man at the front of the line was struggling to handle all of his items in his arms. When he turned towards where I was standing in line, I realized the man had Down syndrome. For myself, interactions with people who have Downs have been easy and “normal.” I guess this is so because I have worked at a camp for people with many forms of special needs, including Downs. I was curious to see how those around him would act or react. As I looked around these are the faces that I saw: eyes filled with pity, eyes completely diverted from his direction, eyes fixated on him with frustration at him taking a little more time, and the eyes that were just indifferent. It is true that he didn't necessarily look the same as everyone else. He was slightly shorter than the average man, and his eyes were more almond shaped than most people's. While it is a fact that people living with Downs have a different physical appearance, isn't it also true that every person has something about them that makes them different? I was instantly

filled with confusion and honestly, some anger. He is a person. He is shopping for groceries like the rest of us. Heck, I remember times where I got carried away and decided to handle too many items, which then proceeded to fall everywhere on the ground around me. See, if it were me... I almost want to assume that people wouldn't care as much.

Then I noticed a father and son in line ahead of me. "Don't stare Sam. That's incredibly rude. Just look away."

The man, who retained these snide comments and a mix of glaring eyes, noticed most of what was happening around him. He ignored them. The anonymous man had a name. His name was Nick. Nick grew up in a home where his diagnosis was taken very seriously. His parents, Molly and Jason, loved their son more than they could express. Before he was born, Molly and Jason got a call from the doctor.

"Hi. This is Janel with Dr. Thompson's office. Dr. Thompson would like you to come in sometime this week."

"Well is everything okay?"

"The doctor will discuss everything with you when you and your husband come into the office."

Molly and Jason arrived at the OBGYN with anxiety looming overhead. Nick would be their first child. Trying for years to have a child can be taxing on a married couple. Many aspects of having a baby can be difficult on a couple.

"Molly, Jason... Thank you for coming in on such short notice. Unfortunately, I have some troubling news about your baby."

The two future parents suddenly felt an even heavier weight placed on their anxious hearts.

“We believe that your child will be born with Down syndrome. There are still options for you. Adoption, termination---“

“I’m sorry termination? Are you saying we should abort our baby?” Molly asked as she shifted her eyes from Dr. Thompson to her husband.

With weighted hearts, Molly and Jason drove back to their two-bedroom home, where they planned to raise their perfect baby. The house was quaint. It was painted white with blue shutters on all of the windows. The front porch almost seemed like it was reaching out as one approached the steps, and once standing on the wooden panels it felt as though the house was welcoming each and every visitor into its arms. This was the couple’s first real house. They had begun their marriage in a small apartment with a leaky ceiling. This house was meant to be their fresh start. As they discussed their choices and the possibilities of their situation, they decided to continue with the pregnancy. A baby. All they wanted was to become a family and raise a child in their humble home. The diagnosis of Down syndrome drove Nick’s parents to begin researching furiously.

Almond-shaped eyes.

Short in stature.

Obesity.

Heart disease.

Thyroid disease.

Speech delays.

Learning deficits.

Social problems.

Medical complications.

Immune deficiency.

Earlier than expected DEATH.

Overwhelmed by the research and medical jargon, Jason and Molly decided to read testimonials by other parents raising a child with Down syndrome. Finally... there was hope.

Joyful.

So loving.

Best thing in our lives.

Hilarious.

Beautiful.

Ours.

Proud to be her mother.

Amazing hugs.

A smile that will change your world.

Even with all of the scary factors that faced the couple, they believed that these stories and testaments filled with love were more compelling. Friends and family did not understand their choice. Molly and Jason remained firm that they would have this baby, and they would love him with everything they had. While people questioned them and silently judged, the couple began decorating the nursery. Blue walls. Winnie the Pooh themed. A crib with every safety measure included. Love filled that room.

Once Nick was brought into this world, Molly and Jason knew their choice was the only choice. He was beautiful. His face was unique, but not in a scary way. And when he smiled for the first time... oh, every heart in the room was warmed and grew three sizes. Little baby Nick was the joy of their life.

Screams broke out from the nursery. Jason burst into the room and picked up his red-faced, wailing child. Something in his gut told him that it was more serious than just a new born crying. Rushing to the hospital, Molly and Jason fell back into their anxious state, almost paralyzed by fear.

“It’s his heart. We need to take him into surgery immediately,” said the doctor with a chilling tone.

As the terrified parents waited with heavy hearts in the waiting room for news of their little boy, the doctors worked furiously to save him.

As a young boy, Nick struggled. He went to a school where no one understood him. The teachers did not help him when he needed help. The other boys teased him mercilessly. The schoolwork was not his main problem. Nick was bright. He thought differently from the other children, more abstractly. His mind was beautiful. However,

people only saw the outside. His almond eyes, his tongue sticking out, the rocking back and forth, the lack of social cues. People did not care to know him. They only stared and tolerated and mocked. Nick's tender and kind heart cried in his mother's breast daily. He did not comprehend why people were so cruel. He would soon learn that his "disability" of Down syndrome set him up for a life of tolerating ignorant people.

A group of boys in Nick's approached him one day. Excited that these boys would soon become his friends, the young boy welcomed them with a big: "HELLOOOO." The boys hugged him and patted him on the back. Nick never felt so included. He was finally feeling like he was a part of a group of friends. This companionship lasted for a couple days. The boys would always come up to Nick and give him a pat on the back in the mornings and before he went home. Then they would go over to another corner and snicker and laugh. Nick didn't necessarily catch on to that part.

One day during recess, Nick had been hugged by his new friends already, but Nick wanted to play with them during their recess. He boldly approached the boys, confident that they would welcome him with kind words and open arms. The boys saw him coming and began to cackle.

"HELLOOOO!" Nick exclaimed to his comrades.

"Hi loser."

Nick's huge smile began to shrink slowly.

"You should check the sticker on your back," one of the boys scoffed.

Nick reached behind and felt a piece of notebook paper stuck to the back of his shirt. As he removed it, the group of boys' laughter roared louder. His face sunk. He walked away with his head hung low. Nick was melancholy for the rest of the day.

When Molly picked up her son from the school, she noticed an overwhelming sense of sadness from his disposition. Nick didn't say anything, and Molly decided not to push him. Once they arrived at home, she checked his backpack. She found the crumpled up piece of notebook paper that had been tacked onto her son's back day after day.

INSERT WRITTEN NOTE:

RETARD

Now a new cry rang from the nursery. As ten-year-old Nick gazed upon his baby sister's face, his world lit up instantly. He was dumbfounded by something so small. She had a face with eyes, a nose, rose colored lips, sweet dimples... Nick suddenly realized that his sister looked so much different than him. She looked normal.

Little Nick adored Allison. "I'm a big brother now. I gotta look after baby Allie." He would say this to just about anyone he'd meet, and the tone in his voice was that of pure pride. Finally, Nick felt like he had a purpose, and he would not let anyone down. Finally, when they would enter the grocery store, Allie would be the one people could stare at, instead of him. Finally, he would be normal.

Unfortunately, people still stared at Nick.

Baby Allie started growing faster, and Nick remained on the smaller side. His parents tried to explain to him that this was a symptom of having Downs. Allie was achieving milestones that took Nick much longer to do. He noticed how she walked sooner. She formed words more easily. She did not have Down syndrome. But his parents assured him that he would grow, and he would be a man. They didn't know that Nick could hear them talking to their friends about his falling behind the rest of his peers.

They also didn't know that Nick could hear them crying in their room at night. While the young boy was not completely sure why they were crying, he could assume it was because he had Down syndrome.

Nick had to learn that his life would never be normal in this society. The world would never understand how smart he was or how kind he was. No one would give him a chance- so he thought.

The little boy from the grocery store, whose father instructed him not to stare, noticed something special when he stared at Nick. The boy looked passed the physical. Sam shoved aside his father and approached Nick. He peered straight into his eyes, and his innocence allowed the boy to see him as a person.

“I'm Sam. What's your name?”

“W-w-well my name is Nick.”

“Do you need any help with your bags? I can help you! I'm pretty strong.”

Stunned by this act of kindness and overwhelming lack of judgment, Nick smiled. Internally he feared some cruel trick about to pounce on his vulnerable state of allowing a boy to speak with him. He remembered the boys from school.

“I don't really care that you look kinda different. I have a weird birthmark on my neck! See?” The boy pointed to a large brown spot on his neck, and suddenly Nick felt a little bit safer.

“Sure, I c-c-could use some help.”

Sam scooped up as many bags as he could grab and waltzed out the door. Nick followed him to where his mother was waiting. When he got into the car Molly noticed a smile that stretched across her son's entire face.

“Who was that, Nick?”

“He's my friend named Sam. My friend Sam- with the birthmark.”

Nick giggled a little. The fear that her son would once again be rejected crept into the back of Molly's mind. Her only hope for Nick was for him to feel like he belonged and know that he was loved beyond belief. She knew deep down that more struggles would bombard Nick's life without fault; however, this moment was worth holding onto... and just hoping that there would be more in the future.

“Nicky, you are my joy.”

Nick's smile grew even bigger, if that was possible. They drove back to their beautiful home, their happy family, and their futures still looking unexpected.

STORY THREE

Friendships begin in all sorts of ways. Two people could meet at school or camp or grow up next door to each other. Truly, the means by which two humans become friends can be almost anything. Friendships serve many purposes. Providing companionship, helping with insecurities, allowing an outlet for feelings, maybe filling a familial relationship. Whatever it may be... I had never expected to have a friend like Jessica.

Growing up I lived in a smaller community of Dallas, Texas. Our house stood proudly on Greenbrier Street, the second one from the corner. It was white with red bricks all over. Greenery grew up and up the sides of the house caressing the windows, and our garden burst brightly with the colors of spring and summer. The quaint two-story held my family within its walls, where pictures from our past hung proudly. Mom, dad, my brother, John, Ginger, the dog, and then myself. I loved that house.

The neighborhood provided a wonderful sense of community and allowed me to make mounds of money with my homemade lemonade stands. I had made many friends on our block, and as my mother told everyone: I never turned down a new friend. When I was about eleven-years-old, a new family moved into the house next to ours. To say that I was ecstatic would be a major understatement. I quickly grabbed my lemonade powder, a jug of water from the tap, my jar for quarters, and my chair. I ran out to my station and scrambled together the two ingredients which created my “famous” lemonade. As I

waited and waited for the new family to come and meet me, I started to grow impatient. It was time to take my business to them directly. I marched on up to the doorstep, and just before I was able to ring the bell, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around quickly to see a girl, about the same as I was, standing there smirking.

“This is my house. May I help you?”

“Oh, well sure! I just live right next door, and I am selling some lemonade. Would you like a cup?”

“I don’t really talk to strangers... or take things from them,” she replied with a heavy amount of sass, but also a sense of fear.

“Well, I’m no stranger. Wanna be friends?”

From that point on, Jessica and I were inseparable. Although she was not a fan of my tangy lemonade, her demeanor and personality kept me constantly guessing what she was thinking. It was like a game. Jessica was the most powerful eleven-year-old I had ever met. We would embark on crazy adventures around the neighborhood. One time, I remember, we found a slimy frog hopping and jumping in the street. Jess, without hesitation, waltzed out into the middle of the road and caught the frog with her own hands. We got a container from the shed behind my house and set the slippery creature into it gently. While carrying the toad around the area, Jessica recommended that we use what we found as a prank. I suggested someone that wouldn’t be so bothered by a little frog hopping around their house, but my bestie had something else in mind. She wanted to scare her parents. I begged her to choose another victim. Her heart was set on her parents. I had always been a little wary of Jessica’s parents. They seemed uptight and

strange. Jessica had a way of convincing me to do anything, so we followed through with the plan. It was wild. I had never run so fast in my life. Adrenaline rushed through us. She feared nothing, well at least that was how it seemed to me at the time.

That night Jessica asked to sleep over at my house... something about her parents yelling again. We built the most incredible pillow fort. Blankets swallowed us. Darkness consumed us. My flashlight allowed us to see each other's faces, but the fort surrounded us on all sides. Laughter broke through the darkness of the pillow castle we had built. Jessica's laugh was contagious. Her smile was rare. Usually, a smirk or phony smile, that I could easily see through, would be her day to day "smile." When she really smiled, it was like she had been freed from a jail cell. I always wondered if that was how she had viewed her house next door to mine.

A few years later, everything had changed. Jessica was still my best friend, but she was different. Her fearless self became more fearful and avoided adventures. Her rare smiles disappeared and were replaced by those fake ones. I would barely even hear her laugh. We stopped having sleepovers, and Jessica grew distant. I noticed her taking pills at the same time every day, and most days she seemed unbelievably tired. At first I assumed it was something I did, but I soon found out that her distance had nothing to do with me.

When Jess and I were about sixteen-years-old, we finally went to the same school together. Together we took on high school, the hardest years of our lives. Some of her fearless nature stuck around for high school. She never seemed to fear the people, like I did. It felt like Jess feared missing out on life, but also living it. I couldn't put a finger

on what it was she was afraid of exactly. But I was worried about losing my friend. And even though Jessica had pushed me away some, she was still my closest friend. I remember on a Tuesday at lunch, she appeared almost stoic. One minute she was talking and laughing, the next she was pale and silent. I will never forget this Tuesday.

Jessica fell to the floor. She hit the cafeteria floor hard. Her arms stuck out stiff. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her entire body began to shake hysterically. No control over her own movements. No way to communicate her thoughts. I saw an immense fear swell in her eyes. People swarmed around her as the teachers yelled for everyone to back away. Everything happened in slow motion. It was like I wasn't there, and I was just watching outside of my own body. All I could do was cry and sit confused about what was happening to my friend. When the ambulance arrived, I wanted to go with her. She was all alone. But I was too scared. I had never seen anything like that before in my life. I couldn't even articulate words to explain it to my parents. I sat at home waiting for some answers. I know I should have gone to see her in the hospital, but I didn't know how to face her.

My mom had called Jessica's parents to get an update. She told me that Jess had been diagnosed with a seizure disorder a few years back. Seizures.

My world suddenly stood still.

Regrettably, years passed. I went to college, made new friends, started a new life. I didn't forget about my old neighbor, but we were not best friends anymore. When I found out about her diagnosis, I felt confused and betrayed. Why would she keep that from me? How was I supposed to handle it? I knew nothing about seizures, but from what I saw... I did not want to know any more. I decided that I couldn't deal with that kind of thing. It was too much for me.

I chose to move back home after I graduated college. I missed my family and that humble little house on Greenbrier. There were new kids selling lemonade at my old corner, and to be honest it tasted much better than my tangy powder and water. The house next door, where Jessica lived, seemed darker than I remembered. There was a stillness about it. My mom explained to me that Jessica never went to college or even graduated high school. She had remained in that house with nurses and doctors flooding in and out of her front door. They couldn't recall for me how many times they had seen an ambulance outside of the house or how many times they saw my friend fall in the front yard and start seizing. Eventually all of these stories began to cause a well of guilt to build up inside of me. I abandoned my friend when she needed me the most. All because I didn't understand her... well, her diagnosis.

Finally, I realized how wrong it was to judge someone based on something that they have zero control over. Her life was the one flipped upside down and turned inside out. Her life was wrecked by this disorder. And her best friend left. I left. Knowing I had to apologize or make it right to her somehow, I walked next door with my head

down. I knocked quietly wondering what I was going to say after all these years. Mrs. Mills slowly creaked open the door. I asked to speak with Jessica, but she told me that she needed her rest. She had just had another seizure episode. Mrs. Mills asked if I would come back later, and of course I told her that I would be happy to come by after dinner.

I could barely eat that night. I wondered if Jess would even recognize who I was. What if she had forgotten me completely? I was overwhelmed by fears of the unknown. I found my old friend sitting silently on her front porch. She looked tired and pale. Her hair was cut short, and her body had bruises all over. When I walked up to her, I was speechless. I assumed that she would be furious with me. I had expected questions of where I had been and why I had left her. I anticipated a slap in the face. And then Jessica bounced up from her porch and embraced me like our friendship picked up where we had left off at age eleven. She still smelled the same. She squeezed me tightly and whispered, "Oh, God. I have missed you." Immediately tears ran rampant down my face. I was shocked and overcome by a feeling of relief. My best friend had never stopped loving me.

We stayed up all night, talking for hours and hours. Catching up with Jessica opened my eyes to all of the things she had been through while I was away. Seizures are some of the scariest occurrences a person can experience. Trauma embodied her life. As she saw the look of pity in my eyes, Jess reassured me that this diagnosis was not all bad. She explained that through being diagnosed with a seizure disorder, she gained a new perspective on life. Even though people treated her delicately and differently, all she

wanted was for people to know that she was still Jessica. She just got the shakes sometimes. Wow. There it was. Her sweet, sincere smile. I never thought that I would see it again.

It took me a while to get used to seeing my dear friend have seizures. Well, to be honest, no one can ever get used to seeing someone go through something that terrifying. My main goal from then on was to love her and treat her like Jessica. She did not want anyone to look at her like a sick person or someone different than herself. That was my purpose. I researched seizures. What to do, what not to do, how to do it... it was overwhelming. Jess explained as much as she could to me, but if I was truly going to be her friend, I needed to know all that I could. I became well-versed in all things seizure. However, that's till wasn't enough to prepare me. Once Jessica had a seizure, most everything I had taught myself flew out the door. I protected her head, rolled her on her side, and made sure she felt safe. Honestly, that was all I could do. It felt good to be there for her, but I also felt completely helpless in those moments. Jessica reassured me that she was just happy that I was there as her friend.

Jess and I had an amazing three more years of unconditional friendship. She taught me that a disability or sickness or insecurity does not define a person. Her friendship changed me, but I will always miss her and her beautiful smile.

STORY FOUR

Summer. Finally.

I am so ready to work at camp for the entire summer. Obviously, I'm nervous, but my nerves are almost overcome by feelings of joy and excitement. Last summer I only worked for half of summer; I guess one could say that I was just too overwhelmed by the thought of serving people with disabilities for a whole summer. But now I am ready. Or at least, I thought that I was.

All of a sudden it was week 7... people called it "Week 7, sent from Heaven," but we all knew that last word should not rhyme with seven. Everyone has been dreading this week, and I had no idea what to expect. After having six weeks of amazing campers, incredible challenges, and life changing experiences, I thought I was ready for anything.

Well, that's a lie.

Physically, I was completely worn down. I was sleep deprived. My body was sore all over from the activities like dance and water games, plus my voice was shot due to the many weeks of singing Disney too loudly. Mentally, I wanted to go home. Missing my family was the least draining and the thoughts of them surrounded me constantly. I was struggling to keep Christ first in the activities and the day to day at camp. I was finding it difficult to teach my campers about God's love and show my missionaries how to love and best serve their campers. Emotionally... emotionally I was drained. Introverted people do not usually belong at a camp that constantly calls for enthusiasm. The emotions of each week would build up and then would be let out by a

huge well of tears, which had been caught up in the dam I built behind my eyes. I didn't want to show any kind of weakness during the week, so I decided to bottle up all of my emotions and let them go in private. Slowly, that became harder and harder to do. The emotions sometimes became too encompassing.

After crying for a few hours alone in my cabin, I headed to our weekly staff meeting. Our director began talking about how this week would be the most challenging thus far, which did not help my mindset. The lights turned off as I was surrounded by the friends I had made over the past weeks. I started wishing, hoping that my cabin would have campers with Down syndrome. At least I could deal with that. I just wanted something easy. I was tired. I closed my eyes and wished these things to myself. Then we started singing worship. I had never heard the song before, but then I listened to the words: "I surrender." I completely broke down. From what I thought was an empty well, tears poured out. I never truly surrendered to Him, and in order to make it through this week... or even through my life, I needed to give up everything that held me back. So, I sang the words: "Lord, have your way in me." I begged the Lord to give me His strength. I wasn't sure if He really heard me though.

During missionary arrival, where we go and wildly welcome the teenagers coming to serve for the week, I ended up running into a worried parent. She asked me about what she should do with an early camper. As it turns out, that camper was assigned to my cabin. Her mom began listing off everything I needed to know, so naturally I grabbed my notebook and started scabbling everything down. To say it was overwhelming would be a massive understatement...

She is sixteen and severely autistic.

Mental age of a two-year-old.

She will not sleep the first night.

She hates being here.

She will not do any activities.

She will stay in the dining hall all day.

She communicates through her iPad.

She will bite and hit.

She needs to be taken to the bathroom every 5-10 minutes.

She will hurt herself.

The list went on for a while, and I started to question my abilities to handle this situation. I remembered our training: they are not a piece of paper with symptoms, they are people, they have feelings, the campers come first, you will be out of your comfort zone... We were trained to see our campers as more than their diagnoses. We were trained to love them without condition.

Ashley was different than any camper I had ever met. She carried around plastic bottles, blankets, and pillows, oh and of course, the iPad. Her arms and hands were covered in bite scars. Her right hand had so much built up scar tissue that it formed a mass in the space between her pointer finger and her thumb. The bangs of her hair rattled

up around her eyes, and her nails were clipped to the bud. When she stood in place, she'd rock back and forth and chew on her bottles. Mostly she would just sit wherever she was and rock even more. I tried to hug Ashley when I first met her, and that was my first mistake. She quickly shoved me to the side and bit her hand. Her mother left quickly, and I didn't receive any more information on how to best serve her daughter. And sure enough, Ashley started off to the dining hall. I sent someone to get her a missionary, and when Sarah arrived, her face carried a look of defeat. I pulled her aside and reminded her of why she was here. I reminded her that she would not be alone. I reminded her that Ashley is a person. Sarah nodded.

We sat with Ashley until dinner, which was about a total five hours. She would press buttons on her iPad that didn't completely make sense. "Pizza, pizza, pizza, coco puffs, coco puffs, coco puffs..." It was never ending, but it did make us all giggle. The robotic voice of that iPad would be one that we would never forget. She wanted food pretty much all the time, but we couldn't give her what she wanted often. When we would have to tell Ashley no, things got a little out of hand. She would throw a huge fit and start biting herself. Sarah and I tried to intervene so that she wouldn't cause harm to herself further. The first time this happened, I froze. I was scared for other campers who might get emotional seeing another camper like this. I was nervous for Sarah and myself as we tried to do our best to help Ashley. Mostly, I was sad for Ashley. She could barely communicate, so understandably she would get upset. I mean can you imagine having so many thoughts and needs, but you are never able to express them clearly to anyone? I couldn't put myself in Ashley's shoes in those moments. It was only after they occurred

that I had to remind myself and Sarah that she is struggling to communicate. It was not because she didn't like us or because she just did it for the sake of attention or something. She just wanted to be understood.

The nights with Ashley were long. She would have to go to the bathroom at least fifteen times a night, even with her sleep medications. Her feet would thump the floor as she ran across the room to get to the toilet. For her, this everyday necessity was extremely painful. Sarah and I would meet her in the restroom and try to help her the best that we could. Her moans of pain bounced off of the cabin walls and created a sense of helplessness. There was truly nothing that we could do for her in her moments of confusion and suffering. I had never felt so helpless than in those moments.

Day by day we tried to get Ashley to participate in some of the fun activities that didn't involve eating Coco Puffs. One time I tried to get her to dance with me during music and dance. At first she liked the music, or so I thought. We played every Disney song possible to try and convince Ashley the activity was fun. On a whim we decided to play some Christmas music, after all it was the week of Christmas in July. "Jingle Bells" rang loud over the speakers in the dining hall. Ashley jumped from the pillow fort she had created on the floor, and she began to run up and down the aisles of chairs. We struck gold with "Jingle Bells." Then the iPad came out. "Chicken nuggets, chicken nuggets, pizza, pizza, coco puffs, coco puffs!" Just in case of a meltdown, Sarah and I realized that carrying around packs of Coco Puffs wasn't such a bad idea. We would use the Coco Puffs to get Ashley to leave the cafeteria, and miraculously it worked, for a

while. I know it sounds bad, like we were treating her like a child, but we were at a loss for what to do sometimes. Our only goal was for Ashley to actually enjoy camp for once.

All of a sudden the iPad made its regular appearance. As usual Ashley pressed “coco puffs, coco puffs...” and so on. She was pretty predictable when it came to the buttons she would press on her device. We never really expected anything other than the usual.

“POOL! POOL! SWIMMING, SWIMMING!”

Shock struck us. Sarah and I made immediate eye contact. Sly grins quickly appeared on our faces. I directed someone to go run to the cabin and grab all of our swim suits. Ashley was ready to have some fun. Her mother never told me she liked to swim, otherwise we would have been in the pool every day. We somehow got into our suits and made our way to the pool. We hadn’t been out of the cafeteria for hours. The sun was shining brighter that day, like it knew it was time for Ashley to come out and play. Without a cloud in the sky, we quickly lathered on sunscreen and got Ashley’s life vest on her. I will never forget the smile that shined on her face when she jumped into that pool. It was joy like I had never seen before in my life. This sweet girl was having the time of her life. A fulltime staff member approached me and asked how we got her in the pool, and I told her that she told us she wanted to go swimming. The staffer looked at me

in awe. She told me that over the past seven years that Ashley had been coming to camp, no one had ever gotten her to participate in any activities. I didn't believe her at first. Then more and more fulltime staffers mentioned similar stories to me. I don't think I will ever know why, after seven years, Ashley finally jumped into that pool, but I was grateful.

We swam the entire three hours allotted for free time. Every minute Ashley flopped around like a dolphin diving in and out of the water. She would float around for a while, get out and make us chase her, then dive right back into the pool. It was madness. It was chaos. But it was beautiful chaos. To be honest, I think that was the first time I saw Ashley without an autism diagnosis. It was the first time I saw her as just a sixteen-year-old girl having a joyful time at a camp. I finally saw Ashley the way that God sees her every minute of every day. And I was jealous. I envied the fact that God could look at each person with a love so unconditional that it erased any imperfection. I wanted those eyes and that vision. I wanted to be free of judgement and stereotypes. Unfortunately, I am not perfect, unlike God.

Over the next few days I desperately needed those eyes...

Day four, notoriously the most difficult day, was just that. We started the day just like every other, up at the crack of dawn and heading to the dining hall in our pajamas. After Ashley's first round of Coco Puffs, we sat at the table drawing pictures and trying to get Ashley to color something. She was not interested. "More please. Coco Puffs, coco puffs, now, now, now!" She wasn't letting up. We reminded her that she could have more at lunch, but that morning she was not budging. After breakfast we told

Ashley that it was time to go back to the cabin for devotionals, and her reaction was unexpected. She hadn't had a big meltdown for a while, so we were not ready for this. I am not telling this part to gain sympathy or make Ashley seem like a horrible camper. What happened was just reality.

As we made it to the side porch outside of the dining hall, Ashley suddenly threw herself onto the wooden floor. She was biting her arm and hitting herself in the head. Ashley started banging her head on the wooden panels. After the first hit, I was so scared she would have a concussion. In order to protect Ashley, Sarah and I surrounded her with all of her pillows and blankets that we always carried with us. I cupped my hands and blocked her head when she would try to thrash it onto the hard floor. We had to hold her hands away from her mouth so that she wouldn't bite herself. Some of her scars were already bleeding from the first few bites that we could not intercept. She thrashed all over the floor. People kept passing us, and I begged them to just keep walking and not to stare at Ashley struggling through an episode. I had been scared before during her earlier moments, but this one was definitely the most traumatizing. All we could do was protect her head and keep telling her that everything was going to be okay.

"It's okay, Ashley.

Don't worry. Everything is alright, sweet girl.

We love you, Ashley."

It was the most helpless feeling. One of the worst parts was not knowing what caused her to become so upset. If we had known what the reason was, then maybe we

could have prevented it. Maybe we could have avoided her pain. Not knowing. That was the worst part.

After what seemed like hours, nurses came to give Ashley some medicine to calm her down a bit. Sweet girl was worn out. When she actually came up for a gulp of air, I saw what I had been fearing the entirety of the episode. Her forehead had started to form an almost horn like abscess emerging from her now blue and purple head. As I moved her bangs away from her head, I could see the bump. It just kept growing. The nurses assured me that she would be fine. Apparently they were used to Ashley's many injuries. They explained to us that since she would bang her head so often that large bump on her head was just inevitable if she hit it in just the right spot. Well, my girl Ashley has great aim apparently.

“Coco puffs, coco puffs, chicken nuggets, chicken nuggets, chicken nuggets.”

And she was back.

That night, after time with our volunteers, I laid outside of our cabin and stared up into the sky. At camp I always loved the fact that the stars shined so bright. I gazed up into the massive universe which my God created, and I wept. God created the heavens and the earth and me and everything that I see... including Ashley. How could He put this heavy burden on a sweet girl and her family? Tears ran like rivers down my cheeks as I prayed and begged God to give me an answer as to why He created Ashley with autism. Then just like in a cliché movie, He answered me in a unique way. One of my leaders came by doing cabin checks, and she laid down beside me. I explained all of my

feelings and questions to her, and her reply hit me hard, and I knew it would stick in the back of my mind for the rest of my life.

“Ashley is not an autistic teenager. She is a teenager living with autism. Our world is broken and messed up because of sin. There really aren’t any clear answers to those questions. There are no nice bows that we can tie onto our problems. Ashley is going to struggle her entire life, unfortunately, that is her life. But, autism does not define who she is or how her life will unfold. It truly sucks, and it’s unfair. So was the cross.”

The last day came swiftly. Even though each individual day felt like an entire week packed into 24 hours, the week ended quicker than I had expected. I felt like I was now a part of Ashley’s life. We had experienced more challenges and laughs than most friends find in a lifetime. Ashley never really accepted any kind of physical touch. But once she gained our trust, she would pull our hands close to herself and giggle. She finally colored us a picture, a white piece of paper covered in blue scribbles. It was beautiful. Ashley became a part of my world, and she never left it.

We waited with heavy hearts for the parents to arrive. Through all of the troubles we had during the week... the laughter and beauty of Ashley’s person, which we discovered, outshined everything else. I wasn’t really ready to watch her leave. I wanted to discover more and understand how to love her better. I felt like it was too soon for her to leave. Six days. Six days were all we had to learn to love this sweet sixteen-year-old girl, and I was still learning.

The door swung open, and each time I prayed that it wouldn't be Ashley's parents. I needed more time with her. I was finally getting somewhere with her. Finally, the moment I had been dreading all day had arrived. Her mother, father, sister, and brother walked through our little cabin door. I brought them over to where Ashley was chewing on her plastic bottles and rocking in her pillow pile. I was slightly surprised at how excited they were to see their daughter. This past week must have been like a vacation to them. Ashley was a fulltime job. Much to my astonishment her family ran to embrace Ashley, and of course Ashley just stood there giggling to herself with her iPad in hand. "Coco puffs, coco puffs, pizza, pizza, swimming, swimming!" As I reviewed the week with her parents, I started missing Ashley more and more... and she wasn't even gone. Since Ashley was not inclined to sit through the closing ceremonies, her family wanted to go ahead and leave early. No. Please don't go.

As the parents gathered all of Ashley's things, I just stood near her. I didn't expect her to understand what was happening or that she was leaving or that I'd never see her again. I didn't expect her to understand how much fun I had that week or how I would never forget her sweet smile. And I definitely didn't expect her to understand how I had come to love her.

I told Ashley goodbye. I thought I could try to hug her... just maybe I could convey my feelings through an attempt. I opened my arms with tears forming in my eyes, and I approached Ashley. Before I could even try to hug her...

Ashley laid her head on my chest and patted me on the back.

She walked out the door, and I heard that annoying robot voice repeating: “Coco puffs, coco puffs, coco puffs.”

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