

## My Scoliosis Story

I attend the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa where I am majoring in General Health Studies and hope to soon be accepted into the Athletic Training Program. My ultimate goal is to become a Doctor of Science in Physical Therapy. What I like to call "the storm" in my life began in junior high school during the annual scoliosis screening. Just like every other year the school performed these screenings, I expected to do the usual; walk in the room, touch my toes so they could see my spine and get sent on my way to things that I thought were way more important. But, this year was different. The nurses suggested that I see a physician and get my spine checked because I had signs of having a mild case of scoliosis.

As an athlete at my junior high school, I was required to get a physical examination before I could participate in any type of sport. The county held free sports physical clinics for people participating in athletics, so I waited and asked about my back at that time. I passed every aspect of my physical examination and when I asked about my back the doctor said it was nothing to worry about and to continue being active. I tried out for the Junior High Cheer Team and made the squad. It was a lot of fun.

However, as the next year progressed there were noticeable changes occurring in my body. All the other girls in my grade were experiencing a lot of changes in their body at this time in life as well, so the subtle changes did not cause much worry in my home. My mother and I simply thought the changes in my figure were attributed to puberty and growing up. My physical shape was not all that was changing though; my goals and choices were changing as well. At the end of the school year, try-out time rolled around again and I decided that I enjoyed the dancing part of cheer much more than tumbling and I tried-out for the Junior Varsity Dance Team. This was a big step for me because I had been a cheerleader since the age of six. I was very happy when selected for the Junior Varsity Dance Team and I knew that it would be a great start to my years in high school. Although it was my first year of dancing, I was named a Universal Dance Association All-Star at dance camp which made me believe I was fine and that the nurses had made a silly mistake.

Soon it was the first day of high school. It was the beginning of my freshman year in high school when my mom and I noticed the shape of my body changing in a way that was not positive. One of my ribs started to protrude, I began having a large number of migraine headaches, my right shoulder blade became prominent and I no longer appeared to be standing straight. It seemed like the changes occurred over night although we knew that was not the case. My primary care doctor referred me to a physician in our area that specializes in scoliosis. On the day of that appointment, I had x-rays done of my spine and the doctor informed me that I had a forty degree flat curve in the spine. The doctor talked with my mom and me about scoliosis and determined it was too late to brace my back due to the maturity of my bones. We were informed the condition could get worse but would more than likely stay the same. For me, there was no question about how I would let this diagnosis effect my life. I was determined to remain active and chose to think of myself as a student of life instead of a victim of it. Thus, I set my goals high.

Over the next year, the changes in my body appeared to worsen. The physician I had been seeing mentioned that surgery would be needed to correct my scoliosis. The curve in my spine had progressed to forty-two degrees. My mom was not comfortable with that news and she began to research procedures and physicians that specialize in scoliosis. My mother

soon contacted the office of Orthopedics for Kids. My first appointment was at the end of my sophomore year. The scoliosis was progressing at a pace that I did not like but I was determined to keep dancing and doing all of things I enjoy. The doctor made me feel much better by telling me that I should not lift weights but I could continue my normal activities and come back to see him at the end of my senior year, unless we felt I needed to be seen sooner. I was very impressed and happy that he did not feel the need to do surgery at that time.

Throughout the remainder of my high school years, I participated and excelled in many things. I learned to dress myself so that the curve in my back was not noticeable to the people around me. I participated in and won several beauty pageants, won scholarship money in the Junior Miss Program, was Vice President of my Senior Class and Varsity Dance Team Captain. My grades were excellent and I graduated with an Honors Diploma in the top 19 of 229 students. There were many times I would get discouraged because I thought everyone around me could see the deformity in my back, my shoulder and my ribs. However, I was determined to enjoy every minute of high school, get accepted into a great college and plant my feet in a direction that would lead to a successful future.

In March 2009, my high school graduation was getting close and my body had been letting me know for months that it was time to see the doctor. At my appointment, the doctor reviewed my x-rays and we discussed surgery to repair my scoliosis. I was prepared for the conversation and prepared to have the surgery as soon after graduation as possible. I knew that the sooner I had the surgery the more likely it would be for me to be recovered in order for me to start school at the University of Alabama in the fall. I was excited and scared at the same time about the surgery but I looked forward to recovery and no longer hurting.

In the blink of an eye, the staff scheduled surgery, pre-op and informed us about blood donations and post-op instructions. The surgery was scheduled for June 18, 2009 at Children's Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama. The wait for my surgery date was agonizing and I thought I was anxious to get it over with but when it finally came down to the day, I wasn't so sure anymore. The thoughts running through my head were not uncommon but were simply magnified as I woke at 4:30am in the morning Thursday July 18, 2009. I'd prayed and prayed as the prior months had passed that God would give me the courage and willfulness to make it through that day. As I rode in the care, with my back not firmly pressed against the car seat for the last time, I realized that this back surgery was no longer a suggestion, it was my reality. Walking into the hospital, where I thought I would be spending the next six days in pain, I could feel my hands shaking at my side, while only hoping God would be with the skillful hands of the doctor, who would soon be placing several rods and screws along my spine in hopes to achieve 100% correction of the deformity.

Wrist bands, consent forms, vital signs and medicine to calm nerves all came so fast that the nervous thoughts quickly slipped my mind. I was soon wheeled out of a waiting room and taken to the operating room. I remember talking to everyone in the room and introducing myself to the medical staff. Then the next thing I knew, I was woken up by the x-ray technicians putting film underneath me, which was not very comfortable at all. Soon after, I was moved to recovery to help get me settled then sent to ICU. I remember being wheeled down the hall to ICU and stopping to speak to my parents for a moment. They looked scared and happy all at the same time. The doctor had previously informed me and my parents that I would more than likely be out of it in ICU and wouldn't be

responsive, but I was exactly opposite. I remember my parents coming into ICU with a nervous and surprised look on their faces when I was not only awake but talking too. The nurses in the ICU were all very helpful. I had a good start and was expected to be moved to a regular room as soon as one came available.

The day after surgery, Friday, I did not remain in ICU very long. It was difficult to move myself in the bed and I remember having trouble taking breathes that were deep enough. The pain was not as bad as I had expected. Of course I was uncomfortable but the staff made sure pain management was a priority. As crazy as it may sound, I enjoyed my time in ICU. The staff was extremely nice and caring and had given me the nickname "Rock Star". Several of the staff members told me I did not look like a patient that belonged in ICU but I am thankful I was given that close attention the first 24 hours after my surgery.

I was doing well the day after my procedure so I was moved into a regular room which is where the challenges began. Although the staff did not expect me to get up, I asked to sit in a chair Friday night. I could not stay there very long but was extremely excited to know that all of my extremities were working just fine. There was one thing bothering me more than anything else and it was the catheter. I did not like having a catheter and could not wait to get it removed so I could walk myself back and forth to the bathroom.

Thankfully, I was reaching milestones by the third day, Saturday June 20, 2009. On that day, I sat up for a while, walked the halls and was doing well enough for the catheter to be removed so I could go to the restroom, with assistance of course. Don't get me wrong, walking the halls and going to the restroom were challenging but I was determined to move about as much as possible. A lot of visitors arrived on Saturday and it was nice to see everyone but I got very tired and eventually, pretty uncomfortable because my morphine pump was taken away. I was scared to give up the morphine pump because of not being sure how bad the pain would become. However the pain was not unbearable and the hospital staff made sure I was watched closely and given something to keep me comfortable as needed. It is in my nature to be a little hard headed so I tried to take as little medication as possible.

By the fourth day, I was exhausted. I had reached all of the milestones necessary to leave but considering being up all night Saturday night, I just know I was going to be in the hospital for a few more days. But the next morning, the doctor came in to check on me and said I was ready to go home. It had been estimated that I would get to go home on Tuesday. I was overwhelmed with emotions Sunday when I was able to go home. My mom was a nervous wreck driving me as I rode in the passenger seat with pillows packed tight around me. The 1 \_ hour drive was extremely uncomfortable because I could feel every bump in the interstate but I didn't complain, I was just glad I was going home. The weeks after my surgery were long and tough. As you would suspect, I had my good days and my bad days. I had to practice walking and standing straight again because I was so used to over compensating for my cure. I had difficulty sleeping at night due to stiffness and soreness in my muscles so I had to change positions and locations very often. You don't realize how important some body parts are until you have a difficult time using them. The recovery was much easier than I had expected and I was out and about in a couple of weeks. By the time I visited the doctor for a 3 week post op visit, I had already been to church, a store or two and tried on every piece of clothing I owned. Everything fit so different and for the first time in years I could not wait to go shopping and try on new clothes. Finally, I can wear fitted clothing like all of my friends.

I am now at a point between adolescence and adulthood, trying to comprehend life and suddenly realizing that my dream of becoming a Doctor of Science in Physical Therapy will soon become reality. My back is doing great, I am enjoying college and every day I am thankful for the doctor, their staff and the staff at Children's Hospital for giving me such great care. It feels very good to stand straight, be pain free and I am a couple of inches taller than prior to surgery.

I realize that achieving my goals will take a lot of dedication but I know my plans and goals can be achieved through faith and hard work. I truly believe that if I hadn't been as active, hard working and focused in high school I would have had a much harder time coping with the pain. The world is a place where God prevails and everything I want is in my grasp as long as I work hard for it. With God and my family by my side, I know I can reach any reasonable goals I set for myself. A quote by Erma Bombeck best summarizes my ultimate goals in life: "When I stand before God at the end of my life I would hope that I would have not a single bit of talent left and could say 'I used everything you gave me'."

Thank you doctor, your talents truly changed my life!

