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5/3/2023
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HCOM 434

In Depth Piece

1 DAY IN

Just another day of school and work is what I thought to myself as I rolled out of bed to make some coffee. Little did I know that gloomy morning in November was about to change my life forever. As I popped out of bed my feet felt like a thousand ants were crawling on them, and my lower back felt as if I had just been stabbed in my sleep. It was the most bizarre sensation I had ever experienced in my life, yet I had no idea what might have caused it. After rushing to a nearby spine specialist in Monterey because I was so worried, the doctor would tell me it wasn't much to worry about. "Your nerves endings are probably just irritated, and you may have slipped a disc while exercising". And this is what I accepted as the truth until I could move back home to San Diego with my family to get a proper MRI and testing done. But looking back now, I knew this was a much larger problem than they were making it out to be. Something was just off. Over the course of the next two weeks that very same tingling sensation would spread throughout my body, eventually making its way to my arms. I would not attend another in person class the rest of the semester, though I somehow managed to pass all of my classes and make my way back home for Christmas. I spent most of the holidays hoping and praying for some sort of Christmas miracle, just make it all go away, it's all just one bad dream I thought to myself. It didn't.

2 Months In

Once January came around, I was finally able to get an MRI of my lower back done. We thought this was the beginning of the end, it would simply be a slipped disc like the doctor had told us, and we would move on. This was far from the case, but things actually seemed to be looking up for a little while, it was the spark I needed at the time. My back pain was slowly getting better, and the tingling sensation had become something that I was learning to accept as a new norm in my life. But once the MRI came back completely negative with no signs of any slipped disc, we were all scratching our head. Given those results, me and my family started to wonder if this tingling sensation was completely separate from the back pain, even though we were pretty much clueless as to what was happening, we had to keep on digging for answers. This meant more doctors' appointments were on the horizon. One appointment was with a neurologist, and the other was with a rheumatologist, but I quickly learned the tough reality of our medical system, my appointments would require another two months of waiting. This blew my mind, but we really didn't have any other option at this point. Urgent care would only see me once but the fact that I was fully mobile and didn't have any notable body dysfunctions yet, they pretty much wrote off my symptoms. I actually had multiple doctors tell me that I just needed to take more vitamins. I really wish that was the case. So, I guess with the Doctors lack of concern, and the condition not yet progressing, there were honestly times I started to feel like myself again, this led me to feeling somewhat optimistic as I found some different ways to exercise which really pulled me out of this depressive state. Instead of running and surfing like I was once used to, I started swimming laps at a nearby public pool. After two months of becoming stagnant on the couch, it truly felt so amazing to finally have some sort of movement

back in my life. Though this really brought my spirits back up for a little while, I was obviously still worried deep down, but I questioned how bad it could possibly be if I'm still walking my dog, swimming, and getting through my days like a somewhat normal person? The future was somehow bright even though we still had no idea what was actually happening inside my body. I may have looked fine on the outside, but on the inside, something was seriously still wrong, it just hadn't progressed and show its full self yet. Looking back now, it's really scary to think about because once again, things would take a drastic turn, leaving me asking how and why?

4 Months in

It was super bowl Sunday, and I instantly knew something was off. You know that feeling when the flu is beginning to make its way through your body? You start to feel weak, your muscles ache, and the chills come on. That's what hit me that first weekend in February, but I sort of knew in the back of my mind this wasn't just the flu. My entire pelvic area became inflamed along with these flu-like symptoms and before I knew it, I was bedridden for a week straight. After multiple covid tests coming back negative and this constant feeling of fatigue that would linger for 2 whole months, we decided to go to urgent care and get every type of bloodwork you could imagine. This is it me and my family thought, this will finally give us some sort answers as to what's wrong with me. But once again, I opened my online portal a few days later just to find the doctor telling me that everything looks "within range and normal". However, there was one test teetering on the positive side, and this was an "ANA" test looking for any signs of an autoimmune disease. My doctor didn't think this was a cause for concern because it was just outside of the standard range, but he sent me to see a rheumatologist to play it safe and rule out things such as lupus or Sjogren's syndrome. After being completely out of it for

two months, that Rheumatologist would go onto diagnosis me with something called fibromyalgia. He would go onto say that he truly didn't see anything too abnormal in my bloodwork that would indicate an autoimmune disease, but everything I'm describing seemed to fit a fibromyalgia diagnosis. He also told me that I'd never be able to run again, and my lifestyle would have to completely change from that point on. Hearing this at 23 and then being put on some really strong medication that comes along with some pretty serious side effects was quite shocking, but we took his word for it out of desperation. We had no other choice at that time. But once again, the two months would go by and we were back to square one, still on the search for an accurate diagnosis.

6 months in

This brings us too today. I just celebrated my 24th birthday with my family and plan to graduate next December, though it was supposed to be this semester, I had to drop most of my classes this semester and focus solely on my health. And that's totally fine, these past 6 months have taught me more about life than I could have ever imagined. It's almost hard to put into words, but here I am trying to do so. And today, we still haven't stopped searching for an answer. In fact, we are getting much closer to a real diagnosis, one that will actually give me some closure and potentially a better quality of life. We soon learned that fibromyalgia is a diagnosis the doctor often gives when he doesn't truly know what's wrong with you, it's usually something that co-occurs with another chronic condition. This is definitely my case because since then, the neuropathy or tingling sensation has progressed to affect both of my eyes and head. Next week I will be getting a brain scan to test for Multiple Sclerosis, a neurological autoimmune disease that affects your spinal cord and brain. Though I've never felt this much anxiety and fear about

something in my life, I have to stay positive and remember that things will eventually work out. Like I said, this experience has honestly given me so much perspective as to what life's truly about. Sometimes I will just start laughing when I sit and think about everything. All the worry, anger, and sadness slowly dissipates when you are faced with something like this. Because all we really have is this current moment, yet we are always so hung up on past mistakes or the futures uncertainty. Everything in my life has suddenly started to make sense, and it seems that the past 6 months of hell has something to do with that. It's safe to say I have become a much stronger person mentally because of this experience. I just hope that whatever it is I'm battling, it doesn't slowly take away my physical ability, that would be really hard for me to accept. This story is not intended to make anyone feel bad for me, it's actually intended to do quite the opposite. I want to encourage people to make the most of every single moment in life, because we far too often just go through the motions until it's too late. Life's a beautiful thing when we are happy and healthy. I question what caused my body to explode at the age of 24, but I truly believe it has something to do with the accumulation of stress and crippling anxiety. Our physical health could not be more connected to our mental health, yet we often separate the two. Loving yourself each and every day could not be more important when it comes to your physical well-being. Even though my future is incredibly uncertain at the moment, I'm so happy to wake up each and every day and spend it with the people I love most. I'm also incredibly thankful I have a family that's been able to support me through this process. Like I said earlier, it's quite funny how everything in my life has started to make sense ever since I got sick. It seems like for so long I was battling myself mentally, but now, my body is fighting itself physically. I want nothing more than to get better because I now realize that the real beauty

and joy within life lies within all the small things and moments. Hopefully by reading my story, you will stop what you're doing, and take care of yourself each and every day because this current moment is all we really have. I know one day I will get back to where I once was, running trails and surfing waves with a huge smile on my face. That is where I felt like my best self. Though I truly miss that feeling of freedom, for now, I will have to learn to love myself and all the little things in my life. Below is a picture of me running Fort Ord this time last year. Thank you so much for reading.

