

personal essay

I had been working a 4-day stretch of 12-hour shifts as a surgical Physician Assistant in Syracuse, New York. This was my dream job. After work, I came home to my apartment and sunk into my couch. As I looked out the window and saw the beautiful sunset I couldn't help but want to get a better view and enjoy the warm summer heat. I grabbed a blanket and climbed the ladder up to the roof. I laid up there watching the sun escape beneath the horizon and then as it darkened, admiring the stars take over the sky. As I tried to descend the 12 foot ladder, I slipped and landed on the hard cement ground beneath me. I laid there in pain for a minute before realizing my fate... I could not feel or move anything from my chest down, I was completely paralyzed. It was in that moment I knew my life was never going to be the same.

That was almost 2 years ago, it feels like yesterday. I have accomplished a lot since then and although I still have a long way to go I'm proud of what I have achieved. My hard work in physical and occupational therapy as well as in the gym with specialized paralysis trainers has made it exponentially easier to move my body throughout the day and accomplish tasks of basic living. My stubbornness for independence has allowed me to require and therefore hire less personal care attendant (PCA) help on a day-to-day basis. My hunger for adventure has provided me with the opportunities to travel to Maryland to sail, California to swim and play tennis and Utah to ski and rock climb. My desire to try new things has introduced new passions of hand cycling and rowing.

Yet even with using some of my strongest core values I am sometimes still left with a feeling of identity loss. I feel like I lost a loved one, as if my able-body self was a completely different human than my disabled body self. I look at pictures of my "old life" and just want to go back. Or sometimes, I wonder where that girl would be now if my accident never happened. And with these feelings, the feelings of isolation and loneliness also emerge. Especially because I was injured in the beginning of the pandemic with a limited visitor policy and restricted patient-patient socialization, my recovery journey began in solitude.

To add to those feelings of loneliness, no one completely understands. At times, the people I used to feel closest with can't even help but give off a sense of pity for me. And there aren't many people familiar with SCI and disability that I am able to truly be myself around and feel as though I am enough just as I am. Recently, this has left me with feelings of social anxiety. I don't fit in to the places I used to anymore; I can't stand or sit on a highchair to have a drink at the bar, it's not easy for me to roll through the grass, through a crowd, or on uneven sidewalks, I can't hop on a boat or a JetSki, and not to mention stairs are obviously out of the question. I'm terrified of the potential consequences my avoidance of these places could have on allowing me to have future adventures.

I can't tell you how excited I am for the opportunity to go to Empower SCI and be surrounded by people just like me. Empower will be the catalyst I need to feel fully comfortable in my own seated skin, wherever I am and whomever I'm with. I'll be surrounded by people that not only

know exactly the kinds of struggles I go through daily but also have tips and tricks to help me face those struggles. Additionally, I will be able to feel certain that the people there appreciate me for who I am and not just the able-bodied person I once was.

Aside from the confidence that being at Empower will give me, the physical aspect of Empower will be an adventure in and of itself, no doubt. I will be road tripping to Long Island to participate in this week long physical therapy boot camp while staying in a dorm without my personal aid! The skills I will learn and independence I will gain there will allow me to continue to adventure. I hope to reclaim a sense of my identity so that I can live freely on this crazy ride we call life. By documenting all these adventures I find purpose in showing others with disabilities, and even those without, that it is still possible to be active and explore this world in a wheelchair. I envision being a part of the Empower family for years to come to continue inspiring others.