My name is Danielle Cummings, and I was raised in the mountains of NM and CO! In the summers, we spent our weekends hiking, biking, and rafting while our winters were full of skiing and snowshoe adventures. The mountains quickly became my safe space and my greatest challenger. My dad continually recounts stories of our adventures where I would not stop until we summited or reached the mile goal even if my other family members stopped and turned back. I did not know it then, but these adventures cultivated grit and determination that was going to launch my love for endurance sports and seeing what my body can achieve. In high school, I truly found my love of distance running and skiing. I fell in love with training and racing half marathons and shredding powder on the weekends all while doing competitive cheerleading at my high school. While I loved cheerleading, nothing compared to getting outside with the wind and sun in my face as I pushed my body to see what it was capable of through running and skiing. All of my stress and anxiety was immediately calmed by the challenge of what I was trying to achieve athletically.

In 2017, I fell 20’ while rock climbing shattering my talus and damaging my ankle and subtalar joint. From the beginning, physicians told me I would never get back to running and that my dream being a physician was over due to my injury being unable to handle the physical demands of both. It was a year before I walked again and then a year of physical therapy to try to regain mobility and functionality in my ankle. I really struggled with the loss of running. I had a friend at the University of Arizona that suggested training with their club triathlon team she was on and competing in the aquabike, essentially a triathlon without the run! I bought a bike and swimsuit, and the rest was history! For the first time in 2 years, I had my safe space and greatest challenger back. I found myself biking 5600’ feet up to the top of the Mount Lemmon with only having 3 months under my belt on the bike and so much more. I was also slowly able to get back to skiing and shredding the pow pow up in Flagstaff. Ultimately, the doctors were right about my ankle; however, I was determined to not let the chronic pain win. While I had to slowly step back from swimming and biking, I was not going to stop skiing even if it meant having to take NSAIDS the entire time and then struggling to walk the next day. I am so thankful that I continued to show up on the mountain because I was able to introduce many of my friends to skiing! Over three years, my ski group went from 4 to 20 people who are all now equally obsessed with the snow as I am.

I was in my first year of medical school and struggling to eat and sleep due to the severity of the pain from completely losing all mobility and the bone being dead. I had a decision to make and knew that I needed a solution that would allow me to live the outdoor active lifestyle I had slowly lost since my initial injury. Amputation was that solution, and in July ’23, I underwent a left below knee amputation. I returned 6 weeks later to start my second year of medical school. This year was defined not only by continuing to learn medicine but by also relearning how to walk in PT, flying out to OK for surgery and prosthetic appointments every month, and my journey back to sport. The year culminated with my earning Phase I Honors and racing at USA Paratriathlon Nationals. My greatest accomplishment is my grit and resilience through the 6.5 yrs of chronic pain and first year as an amputee. I never let the pain stop me from chasing my dreams of becoming a physician and continued to adapt my athletic endeavors to the growing pain. It was the same grit and resilience that allowed me to succeed in my second year of medical school after many orthopedic surgeons told me that I was going to fail out of medical school if I pursued amputation during school. The past 7.5 yrs of my have taught me that only I get to decide what I can achieve, not friends, family, coaches, or my doctors.

I am now currently in my third year of medical school, and I am in awe of the relatability and level of connection my story has given me with patients. My goal with my career in medicine is to inspire and empower my patients to make medical choices based on their values and goals versus my personal limitations and fears of what their decision would look like in my life. Additionally, I hope my story inspires others with disabilities to continue to chase their dreams of being in medicine regardless of what society says they are capable of.

This scholarship would provide the funding for me to work and train with a certified USA Paratriathlon coach as I begin racing internationally in 2025 and start working towards qualifying for paratriathlon at the LA28 Paralympic Games. I raced and won my division at Nationals at 9 months post amputation, and then I attended the Talend ID Camp at the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center with USA Paratriathlon in September. At this camp, I got connected with Peter Helling, the coach I am applying for funding for. I was blown away by his attention to detail in technique as well as his knowledge on maximizing load training. I had some savings that I was able to use to pay for the last few months of training, but due to having no income with medical school, I am applying for this grant to cover his coaching fees for 2025. In the two months that I have worked with him, I have dropped 2 minutes off of my 5k as well as dropped :10s off my 200m in the pool. This grant would truly mean the world to me as it would allow me to receive the level of coaching needed to succeed at the international level! This grant would be the beginning of turning my dreams of racing in paratriathlon in LA28 into a reality.

My parents are my greatest supporters. From childhood to high school sports to now paratriathlon, they could count on one hand the number of races and competitions they have missed. They have given up so much to be present at all of my competitions. At this point in my athletic career, they help cover all the medical expenses like new prosthetics and liners that come with being an amputee. This is no small cost, and I am so thankful for them covering this as it has given me pain-free mobility and an active lifestyle I never thought I would get back.