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Injury Scholarship Letter

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On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the morning after Memorial Day, I had gone to my high school early to finish some tasks related to my chemistry lab aide role there. As a senior, I was technically finished 5 days earlier but school was still in session for the other grades. After two hours, I left and went home to prepare for a trip into town to pick up my graduation party pictures and to meet someone for an early lunch. The weather was hinting for yet another pleasant spring day. All signs were positive. This wasn't just the start of summer for me it was the start of a new chapter in my life! Sadly, that chapter turned out to have an immediate and very cruel plot twist.... At 10:31am EST, while attempting a left turn with my 2002 Saturn sedan, I was struck on the driver's side by a car going nearly 70 miles per hour. One witness later told me she could not approach my car as she was sure I hadn't survived.

First responders called in a helicopter to expedite my trip to the ER. Special extrication equipment was needed to remove me and after that I was in the air. The damage to my car and body was extensive. Miraculously, my head, neck and spine (except for the broken sacrum/tailbone) had no apparent serious injuries. The impact did break my pelvis in six places. This required external fixation (a waist halo) and two screws that permanently reside in my sacrum. Splintering of my pelvic bones caused lacerations to my bladder, spleen, kidney, and adrenal gland. All of them were saved. I also suffered a broken rib, collapsed lung, facial cuts, and life-threatening internal bleeding. Overall, my injuries resulted in a 23-day hospital stay with the first five in the ICU. Upon discharge on June 18, 2015, I was initially wheelchair bound and faced serious pain for many weeks along with therapy.

Just the month prior to my accident, on April 10, 2015, which was my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, we had paid my college deposit to the University of Michigan for the Fall of 2015. My goal was to attend U of M for my undergrad degree and then go on to veterinary school after that. My dream of being a veterinarian has been strong and unchanged since I was seven. This accident had made those plans seem far less possible.

My accident not only took a physical toll on my body but an emotional toll too. I didn't walk at or even physically attend my high school graduation, which occurred two weeks after my accident. In the first few weeks after I returned home from the hospital I had caregivers for most waking hours because my parents were scared something would happen to me again. I was mostly confined indoors for most of the summer. While I don't blame them for their worries, it was hard for me as an independent-minded 18-year-old to have someone babysitting me. It was stressful being confined to a wheelchair and under constant supervision. Unlike my friends, I couldn't go to the beach or get a summer job to make extra money for college. All this likely caused depression which added to the PTSD I had been experiencing. I had nightmares of my accident and was afraid of cars. I missed my life before the accident. I just wanted to get better and have what normal kids my age wanted.

I didn't have time to take it easy though. I was about to start the next step in my life: college. My dream since I was very young is to be a veterinarian. This determination only grew stronger after nearly dying and realizing how short life is. Some people suggested taking a semester off to further heal. Well, I was stubborn and ready for a change. So, in early September of 2015, off to the University of Michigan I went.

That first freshman semester was when I realized I probably couldn't go back to exactly how I was before the accident. I graduated high school ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in my class. I worked tirelessly in and out of school and that hard work had paid off with admission into a premier institution and specifically into a coveted learning community within U of M called WISE (Women in Science & Engineering.) As a hardcore academic, I always put a lot on my plate without any issues. That initial confidence for my freshman year at U of M was no different despite my lingering pain. Instead of taking it easy I was determined to be independent. I would walk a couple of miles daily for classes while blocking out the pain. At night, I would toss and turn for hours; there is no comfortable way to sleep on a healing pelvis. I refused to take any form of pain medication after going through horrific opiate withdrawals in mid-to-late August. I would go to bed at midnight, lie awake in pain until 3:30 am, then finally fall asleep from exhaustion, usually waking up several times in the middle from nightmares. Then, wake up at 7:15 am for my 8:00 am class, organic chemistry. This class was the wall for me. I decided to go to the University of Michigan so that I would be challenged academically. This decision was made before my accident. After my accident, I was challenged enough while still trying to recover. Imagine dealing with that and dealing with the extremely demanding academics of the University of Michigan. That was my situation.

Those early freshman year struggles took me to a very low point. I found out that organic chemistry is not my forte. I took longer to understand it than normal and it just didn't "click" as well as other subjects. It was a hard class for me to begin with but getting less than 4 hours of sleep chronically made it even worse. After the second exam in organic chemistry I decided that I needed to change something. I decided that I had two choices. Choice one was to give up, basically fail organic chemistry and focus on all my other classes. Choice two was to try harder and cut back on all my other classes accepting lower grades so I could put more time into organic chemistry and pass it. I chose the second path because I am stubborn and don't like to give up on things. This worked somewhat well as I did better on my third organic chemistry exam but the material was cumulative. So, the snowball effect was still hitting me hard. Because of cutting back on other classes, those grades slowly declined. When finals came, I was studying like mad for organic chemistry but in the end that final exam was much worse than I anticipated and I failed the class. So, I ended up with the worst possible scenario: failing organic chemistry and letting all my other grades slip. I was on academic probation and in danger of dismissal.

The next semester I retook organic chemistry and took a lighter course load. I also got the help I should have sought in the first place and explored strategies to sleep more. I figured out how much I could handle in my current state of healing. To get more sleep I decided no more 8am's unless I had no other option. A key factor to my recovery, despite initial roadblocks from U of M Housing, was when I got an emotional support animal. My cat, Emma, was and still is there to comfort me in the middle of the night when I wake up from a nightmare in a panic. When I am stressed or upset I can just pet her and instantly feel better. So, how did that second freshman semester go? I received a 3.28! I just finished my fall 2016 semester with a 3.16. Overall, my GPA is at 2.79 due to the disastrous fall 2015 semester. I do now believe that I will finish my degree at U of M and likely get into veterinary school.

It has been a little over a year and a half since my accident and I am still healing. Since my struggles that first semester I have learned a lot about how to slow down and only do what I can handle. My experiences allow me to keep the big picture in perspective and not get upset over little things like one terrible grade. I now speak openly about my experiences and serve as a peer mentor to incoming freshmen within the WISE program, helping them overcome their own struggles and anxieties over grades. I will never forget my accident and all the lessons I have learned from it. It is a large part of who I am today and although it obstructed my path in the early days, it now, in a way, propels me toward my goals.