

The View From Here

By: Justine Chichester

“Clothes mean nothing until someone lives in them.” – Marc Jacobs

I have this yellow dress hanging in my closet. I bought it in September 2014 to wear to a function I was going to be attending with my husband a few weeks later. To make a very long story short, I fell, went to the hospital, had three surgeries and was ultimately labeled a paraplegic. Needless to say, I never got to wear the dress, and I never made it to the function.

I didn't go into my closet for well over a year after I came home from the hospital. Part of it was because my first wheelchair was too big and too clunky to fit through the entry of my “walk-in” closet. But, to be honest, I didn't go in my closet mainly because the memories of all of my clothes were too painful to face. Each article of clothing, each pair of shoes was a bright and beautiful, albeit painful, reminder of everything I did before my fall. All of the things I used to wear and, I felt at the time, could never wear again. Like pictures in a photo album, the clothes hanging in my closet represented so many memories from the times I took for granted standing on my two feet.

As I wheeled past the closet to go into another room, I would catch a glimpse of certain articles of clothing that would spark a memory. The short, green dress I used to wear to work, or the black heels I used to run up and down the stairs in. And, yes, that yellow dress I bought for that function I never attended. While they were just material things, the clothes in my closet were forcing me to think about my life before my injury. But I wasn't prepared, I wasn't ready, to tackle all of the memories all together at once.

It's amazing to think so many emotions can be tied to pieces of cloth hanging in your closet. It happens to all of us, though. Not just after a traumatic experience. We all keep the jeans we wore in college, or the pretty dress from that special first date. It's not necessarily the article of clothing itself is that special; it is the connection that piece of cloth represents to an important moment of time in your life.

I knew that I couldn't continue blocking out this part of my life. I had to ask myself, like so many other situations I've had to face with my disability, am I ready to leave the past in the past and move forward with my new future? The answer was yes. Finally. And after a year of being home, refusing to face the memories in my closet, I took a positive outlook, wheeled my new, smaller, lighter chair into my closet and I began to clean out the clothes that no longer served me; I boxed up and donated the shoes I would no longer be able to wear with my braces and I made room for the new wardrobe that best served my new life. It wasn't easy. Letting go of anything never is. There were definitely tears. And it was a process. But I kept reminding myself that I still have my memories, even if that piece of clothing no longer hangs in my closet.

I did keep one thing, though. That yellow dress. You know....just for memory's sake.