

The View From Here

By: Justine Chichester

"Being positive isn't pretending everything is good. It's seeing the good in everything."

I get a lot of questions since my injury. People ask me everything from, "Why are you in a wheelchair?" To..."How do you drive a car now?" Or, "How do you get in the car?" And, yes, even "How do you go to the bathroom?" Yes, people can get very, very personal. But, I'm happy to answer and share my experience as best as I can, because most are just curious and almost all are well intending. Some of my fellow SCI survivors are offended at these types of questions, though, and that's completely understandable too. Our stories are deeply personal and often times difficult to share. We, also, really just seek to live our best "normal" lives once again and continuous questions about our daily living tends to make that a little frustrating. I've come to realize, though, that it's now my responsibility to share my story and my journey with those who are interested and who want to learn. Undoubtedly the question I get the most is, "How do you stay so positive?"

If you knew me "before," and if you know me now, "after," you know that I have always been a very positive, upbeat person. Always smiling, finding the brighter side of any situation. But somewhere in between the before and the after, my spirit was broken, and I lost all of that positivity. Enduring a trauma, going through an illness or an injury tests your resolve. Dealing with illness or any kind of real adversity on a day-to-day basis can make it seem impossible to find anything positive to hold on to. I know. Things kept going wrong for me after my fall. I got sicker and sicker. Spent more and more time in various hospitals. Had to have surgery after surgery. Then ended up not walking and in a wheelchair. It was so easy for me to dwell on everything I had lost when the negatives seemed to outweigh anything positive.

At a point during one of my many hospital stays, I was taken down for a scan. Wheeled downstairs from my room, on a gurney, to what seemed like the basement of the hospital. The scan was done, and the radiologist wheeled me, on the gurney, out to the hallway to wait for transport back up to my room. The hallway was dark and there were other patients lined up on gurneys along the wall. Also waiting. All I could do is lay there and wait, as time ticked by. I was ready to go, I wanted to be out of that creepy place, but all I could do was lie there and wait. As more time inched by, I got more and more anxious. Waiting. I obviously couldn't get up to check and ask if someone was coming. I can't stand. I can't walk. I was stuck laying there in the dark hallway for hours until finally someone showed up. I promised myself then and there that I would never take another moment outside of that hallway, that hospital, for granted. When I do have a difficult day, or when things are not going my way, I remember times like that, in that hospital hallway where I promised myself to remember that anywhere, anything is better than here.

Being positive, being happy, is a powerful thing. It is a choice we make based on our experiences that are not always the best times in our lives. Maya Angelou once said, "You may encounter defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, and how you can still come out of it."