

The View From Here

By: Justine Chichester

“Celebrate what you’ve accomplished but raise the bar a little higher each time you succeed.” – Mia Hamm

This month marks exactly five years since I began my journey to walk again. After suffering a spinal cord injury and being labeled a paraplegic, I made the decision to begin rigorous physical therapy to walk once again. I knew the goal was monumental, and I learned it would take everything I had (and then some) to achieve it. What I didn’t expect were the smaller achievements along the way which would become so important, if not even more meaningful, than the ultimate goal of walking again.

The definition of paralysis is the loss of the ability to move and to feel anything in part or most of the body, typically as a result of illness or injury. When most of us imagine someone who is paralyzed, we envision a person in a wheelchair, who cannot walk. When I suddenly became a person living with paralysis, I could have never imagined that it is so much more than that. So much more than just losing your ability to walk. Paralysis effects every moment of your life. Every single movement you can or can’t make. And there were so many things I could no longer do. The loss of the ability to do everyday tasks, like getting dressed standing up, showering, putting on makeup, jumping in my car to drive somewhere. These proved to be much more life-altering than the loss of my ability to walk.

Nonetheless, the big picture goal when I started my physical therapy in March of 2015 was to walk again. It took months, but I was lucky enough and worked so hard that I actually started taking steps once again. I was able to finally walk across a room, using a walker, and eventually started successfully walking outside, crossing the street and now I am getting out to restaurants and attending some events on my feet. These have been huge accomplishments. And I celebrate them, still, over and over and constantly thank my lucky stars that I’ve been able to come back from such an incredible injury.

But I’ve found that the smaller goals, the quiet ones along the way, are the ones that end up meaning the most. The first time I was able to stand up again and put a plate away in a cabinet in my kitchen, was a huge success for me. I was all alone, and it was the first time I learned to clap for my damn self! There would be many more of these seemingly-smaller accomplishments that I met and exceeded along the way. Balancing without holding on to the walker, even if just for a few minutes....Huge deal. Morning makeup routine, once again standing. Yey me! I didn’t post them on social media, like I did with the bigger moments walking again. I didn’t send out a group text telling everyone about the latest success I had. I just celebrated those moments myself, knowing they were an important part of the larger goal.

On this very long journey to recovery, I’ve learned that it’s the smallest milestones you reach that reap the biggest rewards. So often we put all of our focus on the ultimate goal, that we forget and neglect to honor those smaller milestones we achieve along the way. Usually because those smaller steps you take are not as big, bright and shiny as the ultimate destination you’re trying to reach.

Nelson Mandela so poignantly once said, “Remember to celebrate milestones as you prepare for the road ahead.” It has become so important for me to acknowledge and celebrate each step and each achievement on my path to recovery.....no matter how big or how small those milestones may seem.