



Become involved and see beyond disease

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As a biochemistry student, a varsity athlete, a lifeguard and even an entrepreneur through Ontario's Summer Company Program, my life was pretty hectic at age 18.

I would spend my days in class, my evenings with friends and my nights working for the Residence Life office at McMaster University. Everyday was as fun and busy as the last, and that's exactly how I liked it. That was until everything changed. It was at the beginning of my second year at university that I first began to show symptoms. The pain would shoot through my abdomen, so intense it would keep me up at night, and force me to stay in bed during the day. Sometimes it was too much to even stand upright.

I saw three different doctors who told me three different stories. I was told I had to just eat healthier, more probiotics. Then I was told it was stress from university due to dates and deadlines; it was "normal." Then finally I was sent to a gastroenterologist.

Being away at university, I went alone to get colonoscopies and barium tests. It was just days before my 20th birthday that I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. For me, the diagnosis was great. I had never heard of Crohn's disease before, but it didn't matter. I had answers and soon I would have a cure. Of course, soon after I discovered, this wasn't the case...at all.

I soon found out that all a diagnosis of Crohn's disease meant was that it was chronic and incurable. If news like that doesn't knock you down, I don't know what can. Continuous blood tests, specialist visits, and drug cocktails that were continuously changed until they worked sure took its toll. It was hard enough to make it to a class, let alone study. Crohn's Disease took my old life.

If that doesn't sound bad enough, Crohn's disease, for a woman who was almost 20, is filled with stigma. It isn't glamorous to speak about a disease under the umbrella of Irritable Bowel Disease (IBD).

And with this, I had a choice. I could let this disease overturn me. Speak nothing of it, be in isolation and cross my fingers that the next medical cocktail would work better than the last, or I could embark on a journey for change.

Upon yet another visit to the specialist, I saw a pamphlet for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada (CCFC).

I joined. I got the Welcome Kit and in a strange way, I felt better almost immediately. People were talking about it, I wasn't alone and people were working toward answers. This made me feel empowered.

From the CCFC I saw an application to join the Youth Advisory Council (YAC). On the YAC, I joined 13 other youth from across Canada to be the voice of Youth living with IBD. Helping to work in conjunction with local CCFC chapters, I felt I could make a difference.

For me, perhaps Crohn's came just at the right time. Seeing what I could do from a social standpoint with the foundation and the youth advisory council sparked the idea that there was more I can do.

With my biochemistry background, I applied to a masters of science program in medical sciences. As a masters student at the Wallace lab at the Farncombe Family Digestive Health Research Institute at McMaster University, I am at the cusp of innovation and discovery for IBD.

Crohn's disease, like any chronic inflammatory disease, is painful. It's sporadic and sometimes debilitating. But the more I've become involved, the more I can see beyond IBD.

There are resources and support, and eventually there will be answers. I am not only a Crohn's Disease patient, I am a young individual committed to being a part of the cure.

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