

Get Up Eight

I faced a life-threatening battle and I'm only 17 years old. Just several hours after I came into this world, I was nearly taken out of it by my own heart. The diagnosis was rare: a heart defect that would have required several surgeries with an unknown outcome. But fate had a different plan for me. In a one in a million chance, the best surgeon in the world happened to be in the same hospital. Dr. Richard Jonas fixed my heart with just one surgery and granted me the chance to experience life.

I was too young to remember my surgery and recovery, but I distinctly remember when I first learned of it and saw the scars on my body. As a young girl, hearing that you were born broken was extremely difficult. I remember feeling confused and scared. I didn't understand the 'why': why did I have to experience that? Every day, I would see the scars and couldn't help but think about a life that may not have been. But then one day, I realized that having such a negative mindset would hold me back. It would keep me from being free and accomplishing great things. I was given a chance at life; my successful surgery and my will to live are why I am here today. There is a saying my Japanese grandmother told me when I was young: "Nana korobi ya oki" which means fall down seven times, get up eight. I have carried this advice with me and will never allow setbacks to keep me from trying again.

Now, I'm at a stage in life where I am often asked, "Where do you want to go to college?" I feel a lot of pride and excitement when I answer, "The United States Air Force Academy." For those who know me well, my answer is no surprise to them because I believe my desire to serve my country is in my DNA, given my family's long history of serving in the military. It was my parents' military service that had us stationed in Washington D.C. where I was fortunate to be able to be treated by Dr. Jonas. And were it not for the military's excellent health insurance, my parents would never have been able to afford the surgery I needed to save my life. It is for this reason, among many others, that I feel a calling to give back to my country. And like my mom, who was a career Air Force officer, my goal has always been to follow in her footsteps.

However, given how strict the Academy's medical qualifications are for applicants, the surgery I had made that dream hard, even impossible, to achieve. When I got the notification that my application was medically disqualified because of a factor that was beyond my control at a day old, I was devastated. It made me feel small, as if all of the achievements I've made in my life were somehow not enough to look past the heart surgery I had.

However, if the surgery taught me one thing, it's that I am stronger than I ever imagined. The very challenge I faced as a newborn was also one of my greatest achievements, revealing the resilience and perseverance I embody. I understood that if I faced such a major challenge in the first hours of my life, I can do anything— now and in the future.

Having been given a second chance at life, my heart surgery does not weigh me down but builds my motivation and passion to live life to the fullest. Dreams and goals are no longer merely thoughts but imperatives. My scars are simply more than just marks- they are a visible memory of my struggle and success, encouraging me to pursue a life that is cherished, as I see now that life is a gift, and not always guaranteed.

And even though my congenital heart defect has prevented me from going to the Air Force Academy, I'm still pursuing my dream to serve my country. I've recently been accepted to Embry-Riddle, a prestigious and competitive university with an academic and career-driven staff and student body. I am excited for this opportunity and look forward to earning my bachelor's degree in Global Security and Intelligence Studies. And while I will still keep trying to pursue a commission in the Air Force, I won't let my heart defect keep me from becoming an Intelligence Officer and defending my country.