

“He’s walking, he’s walking!” was the call my parents made not to the grandparents, but to my therapists when I took my first steps at age 2 – a feat my doctors thought impossible. In 2001, I was born 12 weeks premature. It was decided that my Mom would leave her full-time job to care for me while my Dad continued to provide for our family.

At 18 months old after a prolonged stay in the NICU, I received a Cerebral Palsy (CP) diagnosis. My doctors believed that I would not walk or talk, in addition to many other hurdles that would impact my daily life. My journey towards independence started at a young age engaging in Speech, Occupational and Physical therapy services with Easterseals DuPage & Fox Valley. I started with speech to build my respiratory capabilities by working towards a very fun goal: blowing out birthday candles. After more than a decade of therapy services, I achieved my independence. I will be forever grateful for the support that my family and I received from everyone involved in my care.

In reflecting on my educational journey and my daily life, my CP diagnosis has made handwriting, taking a multiple-choice exam, or holding up my trombone at the proper angle for a marching band performance difficult and physically straining. I am fortunate to have access to accommodations to level the playing field in light of my fine and gross motor challenges. My accommodations, among others, provide me the opportunity to complete all written assignments electronically, and receive assistance in completing scantron documents during exams – allowing me equal opportunity to demonstrate my knowledge.

Overcoming significant physical limitations has shown me that I can achieve anything with effort and dedication. My challenges surrounding my diagnosis has driven me to become a goal-oriented and dedicated student at Drake University and a passionate advocate for people with disabilities. After being given the priceless gift of independence, I knew I had a responsibility to pay forward to both Easterseals and my community as a whole.

Since 2007, I have had the honor of representing Easterseals as an ambassador, being a voice for the organization’s public policy efforts such as *The First Five Count* and sharing my story with donors and community groups large and small to demonstrate how their donation dollars drive impact. During COVID-19, I worked closely with Easterseals’ Development team to deliver remarks for a virtual signature fundraising event to raise funds for critical needs during this unprecedented time. I also am heavily invested in my family’s church, assisting congregants with the use of Zoom, and serving as a member of the administrative council/Board of Directors.

My most meaningful involvement on campus is my service on Drake’s Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) task force. Our team has the responsibility for advocating for accessibility on campus, as well as encouraging disability inclusion on campus. This past October, in celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, I co-moderated a panel discussion with key Drake stakeholders to discuss the history of the ADA, workforce protections for individuals with disabilities, and support services for students. In addition, in late April, my colleagues and I successfully presented proposals to senior University administration to make our residence halls more accessible for all.

My service experiences have afforded me the opportunity to both give back to those who have given me so much, as well as build numerous soft skills, such as public speaking or leading a team, and helped me build my desire to have a career that made an impact. I was deeply humbled last May to be selected as the 2020 Youth Volunteer of the Year by the Village of Schaumburg.

In my first year at Drake, I have taken advantage of opportunities to get involved, build my network, develop leadership skills, and intern during tax season at a local accounting firm. I currently serve as Treasurer of the Residence Hall Association (RHA) where I am responsible for managing and developing the organization's \$20,000 budget. This experience has taught me invaluable financial and project management skills that will pay dividends for my future involvement on campus and career.

This past summer, I had the honor of being selected by Bank of America as one of five Bank of America Student Leaders in the Chicago market. This program allowed me to network with 300 community-minded students from across the country, build advocacy skills, engage in discussions surrounding current issues, as well as learn about how the intersection of the business, nonprofit, and government sectors work together to solve community problems. My team and I had the opportunity to work with the Atlanta-based East Lake Foundation to develop a digital campaign, entitled Ballots4Change, with an aim to educate Atlanta and Chicago residents on the importance and process of voting. In addition, my colleagues and I had the unique opportunity to learn firsthand of the work undertaken by high-achieving nonprofits in the Chicago area through our engagement with the Bank of America Neighborhood Builders grant program. Our team was asked to read applications submitted for the grant, which focused on how Bank of America's funding and leadership training would be used to positively benefit their organization. This process allowed me greater understanding of the potential that can be created when businesses make investments into communities. With my desire to lead an organization in the future, my experience in the Student Leaders program reinforced my understanding that when making decisions, it is critical to consider more than simply the "bottom line." The impact of a decision on a company's community, employees and environment are more important than anything that can be measured on an income statement.

My successes in achieving my independence despite the expectations of numerous doctors can be credited in no small part to my entire family who have made major sacrifices in their life and careers to care for me. Since I was born, our family has been financially affected by high medical expenses. Beyond my care, my Mom has battled cancer, and both my brother and Dad have received ongoing medical care for a multitude of health challenges. The pandemic has reduced our family's income by \$20,000 due to wage reductions and declines in manufacturing purchases (the industry where my Dad works). In addition, the safest living environment given my diagnosis during the pandemic is a single residence hall room, which comes a significant additional cost. Receiving a scholarship will relieve a large financial burden on my family, allowing me to make the most of Drake's extraordinary educational experience.