

2003 HS Scholarship Winner



Lisa A. Bernice

Singer/songwriter Jewel once said, "We let ourselves off the hook by saying, I'm only human." Only human? That's a gift, not a weakness. I strongly agree with this insightful declaration. This gift of life was given to us by God, and by knowing and trusting this, I firmly believe that He does not give us more than we can handle. Through the eyes of faith, anyone can overcome even the darkest of situations. It was my faith that kept my spirits high during such a difficult period in my life, a period when I became ill with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. It is this faith that has also made me into the person I am today.

It has been my personal desire from as far back as I can recall to one day attend college and become a teacher. This has been my mindset for many years. I was further inspired by my seventh grade teacher who had such a profound effect on me personally. My dream from my first year in high school was to one day attend The College of New Jersey as an education major. A dream that seemed to fade when I suddenly became ill from an unknown source.

My first symptoms flared up towards the end of my eighth grade year. However, I didn't think too much of it. I was just a little more tired than usual and I experienced a bout of blacking out. I just assumed it was nothing of extensive importance until my freshman year of high school. In January of 2000, I became rapidly ill with increased sleep requirements and flu-like symptoms. Unable to attend school on a normal basis, I finished my first year of high school under the care of Bergen County Special Services.

In the mean time, I was back and forth from doctors, to specialist, and test sites trying to diagnose my illness. My school administrators had become annoyed with the duration of my illness. I was told by them that my condition was psychological. Their lack of understanding or willingness to understand and their misinterpretation humiliated me and greatly affected me emotionally. While at my Catholic high school, I was told that I must leave. Being a Catholic institution that promotes compassion and helping the sick, I was terribly disturbed. I was fifteen at the time, and never had I encountered a situation of this magnitude. I had now known what it felt like to be discriminated against.

My parents and I fought the school's decision and I was able to continue on complete home instruction. However, despite my qualifications, I was not permitted to be a member of the National Honor Society or even attend my Junior Prom. By not physically being able to attend school, I was being deprived of all the usual traditions and joys associated with teenage life. I was excluded from and by my school.

On the higher note, the whole period was one of great emerging. I experienced my physical, emotional, and spiritual states on extreme levels. My perception of myself, people and life changed. Through this difficult time, I developed deep convictions of faith in God and His power to heal situations and people. I always had valued prayer, but I even started to pray for all my antagonists.

During this period, I was introduced to adversity. Not only was I introduced to it, but I preserved and attained a greater insight into my strength and myself. I transcended to a higher level of spirituality, which now allows me to deal with circumstances of any size and to see the good in all people even when it seems difficult.

I still hold many of the same virtues as I have always had. I am still driven to reach my highest self and become the best person I can be. My determination and drive have been my desires and goals from as far back as I can recall.

As mentioned before, my dream has always been to study education at The College of New Jersey. In the fall, my dream will become a reality. I have been accepted as a Deaf and Hard of Hearing/Elementary History major. The gift to touch another person's life for the better is exactly what we as humans are all about. Just as I was inspired by my seventh grade teacher, I realized that I also want to have that same positive effect on others. Now I will be given the chance to do just that. Although now, my incentive is far more passionate than it was five years ago. I know how it feels as a student to be misunderstood, humiliated, and discriminated against by school administrators because you have a physical disability. This is all the more reason why I not only want but need to help children. After coming down with CFS my career goals expanded to help children with disabilities and it influenced me to apply to the teaching program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing at TCNJ. All children need advocates and need to feel secure. My parents have been my advocates and are the ones who have made me feel secure. I have been blessed to have the parents I do. Unfortunately, not all parents are like mine and that is why I want to be a teacher for those special children and hopefully make a difference in their lives.

I have grown up immensely during these past few years. I am now doing better physically, I am now back in school and active within a new school environment. These difficult times have altered my perceptions on life and I am truly grateful for all I had to endure and all that I have. This gratitude serves as my inspiration and motivation in life. I have now realized that my strength, independence, and determination come from this source. The best lesson I have learned is: in life your biggest trials can become your greatest triumphs.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome has made me a better person. It may sound absurd, but I am grateful for it and the effect it has had on my life. If I could go back, I would not change a thing. If all this hardship was God's purpose for me, I have no complaints because I trust in Him and His work. We all have our crosses to bear, some are just a little heavier than others. Yes, I'm only human. My cross may be heavier than most, but that is fine by me because in "my gift of life", I do not consider myself weak.