

2012 HS Scholarship Winner



Allison Reading

I'm listening to the explanation for what seemed like my tenth icebreaker of the day. My gym teacher explains how we will be incorporating a Frisbee into a round of 20 questions in order to break the ice for our first day of freshman gym class. Never a prodigy in gym class, I did my best to, if not catch the Frisbee, at least bat it down and not-so-gracefully throw again. I was listening to a stream of rather un-insightful answers about my new classmates' favorite colors, movies, and foods and awaiting the dreaded question that had plagued me all day. Finally it came.

One by one, the students told the class which sports they played. All was running smoothly until it was my turn to respond. My simple, "um, actually I don't play any sports," quickly turned the students from understanding and accepting to awkward and polite. "Oh... that's cool, I guess." I was used to the response. It was only fourth period on my first day of freshman year, but I had already become accustomed to the fact that I was entering the land of the three-season varsity sport athlete. Aside from the icebreakers my freshman year, I never thought it would be a problem to be an Israelite in the middle of Ancient Greece. For the first two years of High School it never was. Soon I forgot that most of my teachers and peers stayed an extra few hours after school to run around and burn energy that I never seemed to have.

Junior year rolled around though and from the first week it was immediately different. I was facing a menagerie of different health problems that made it impossible to get to school or even focus on a book. Suddenly being surrounded by a student body and faculty comprised of Darwin's most naturally fit seemed to have its problems. Even the most understanding of classmates had trouble being sympathetic without a concrete explanation or diagnosis they recognized. To their minds Chronic Fatigue and Immunodeficiency Syndrome was cured with a cup of coffee. When they were sick, they took a Sudafed and came to school anyway.

I felt like Alice Paul pleading with an all-male Congress for women's suffrage or Martin Luther King appealing to an all-white government for civil rights. Without diversity in the ruling parties, at the end of the day, pleas fall on deaf ears. It wasn't that I was lazy or a hypochondriac, I just had a problem that none of the administration and little of the student body had ever faced. Because there was no school policy for absences extending over ten days, I had to fight for my place in the higher-level classes and eventually my right to return to school at all. At the end of the year both sides had won and lost several battles, I had managed to get to school 76 days in the year, kept all but one of my original classes, and did relatively well on finals and AP exams. As a senior, however, the administration would not allow me my long-planned schedule of Honors Arabic, AP English Comp, AP World Cultures, and AP Government, although they eventually permitted me to take Honors English and Honors Chorus.

For the majority of young adults, health is taken for granted: they even abuse their bodies with various substances. For me, now that my health has improved, no drop of energy is wasted and no minute of the day is taken for granted. Every day has to be scheduled as to when to sleep, when to work, and when to eat or drink in order to optimize the abilities of my body. It provides a unique perspective on every aspect of my life, whether it is analyzing the immune system in biology, studying Plato's philosophy on unhealthy people in his Republic, considering Obama's healthcare package or developing an energy-efficient approach to teaching myself Algebra and Japanese (mental energy can be exhausting, too). This illness has changed my approach to life. I do not want to settle for being sick or giving things up. I've learned to work around my illness, to achieve as much as I can and not take any healthy moment or small accomplishment for granted.

In the future I hope to take my experiences with CFS and apply them to what I pursue as a career. My experiences have opened my eyes to gaping chasms in health care as well as to public ignorance of this debilitating disease. What I have gone through these last few years has changed me, and it is impossible to continue without CFS affecting

how I see the world. Although plans and goals were changed because of this illness, I no longer look at it as a curse. I am intelligent and passionate but going into high school I had nothing specific to focus on. Having this illness has, in fact, opened opportunities to work hard and be passionate about something that has personally affected me. I honestly cannot wait to offer my skills and talents in order to help millions of people suffering from the same things as me. Although my experiences were largely horrific, they will inspire me to help people with CFS in whatever career I choose. In either medical research or public service, I know I can do a lot of good for this underrepresented, neglected group of people, and there is simply nothing more that I want to do.