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How it Feels

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photography by cyan james

how it feels

as told to katy fiegen
"When I was three, I was diagnosed with kidney failure. When I was five, I had my first kidney transplant. After that, my kidney lasted nine years and my body rejected it. Kidney transplants are not a permanent solution. After that, I went back on dialysis for 11 years. Basically, I didn't pee for 11 years. On Christmas Eve, I got called for another transplant. Growing up, some kids thought I was spoiled for getting the extra attention, and some treated me solely out of my health problem and over-protected me. And some just accepted me. You're well-known because you are different. Buying clothes is frustrating for me. I'm short and stout so my pants are usually too long in the legs, and the waist is too small or too big. I have a footstool in my apartment, and the only place I use it is in the kitchen. With people, it's usually ignorance. They judge me before they ask, and I wish that if they had a question, they'd just ask. If I'm in the supermarket and some little kid asks their mom 'What happened to him?' sometimes I do turn around and say 'When I was little, just like you, I had a kidney transplant and the medicine the doctor put me on stunted my growth.' I think it's annoying when people avoid me because of my height. I know that people can get past it. I'm just like everyone else — except I'm short."
"My mom is 5'11" and my dad is 6'4". I've always been taller than everyone my age. You get accustomed to doorways after the first few times you hit one. For clothes, you don't have a lot of selection. You take what fits. It's all order-in. I never have a problem with impulse buying. In the dorms I had an extra-extra long mattress. I always kept my bed on the floor. I never trusted my weight with a loft. There are some classrooms that the desk space is pretty close, like Physics and the auditorium in Curtiss, so I make sure and find a spot with an aisle in front of me. I drive a 1990 Dodge Caravan. I have a dent in my leg from where the console hits. Some people are intimidated. Some people say stupid things like 'Wow, you're tall!' When I'm with a group of people, it's always if we get separated, just 'Look for Skogs!'"

Andrew Skoglund, 7'1"
Ashley Lerch, wheelchair

“When I was three, I was riding with my dad in a tractor, and I was getting really hot. And, of course, being three, I was really impatient. I jumped down from the seat and hit what I thought was the window latch, but it was really the door and it swung me out and I fell to the ground. The tractor ran over me. I went to the hospital, and at the time, they treated me for a skull fracture and cracked ribs. The biggest worry they had was brain swelling. Three days later a blood clot formed in my spinal cord, and it paralyzed me from the belly button down. I went to the Shriners Hospital for Children in Chicago for physical therapy. They started me on a wheelchair and a parapodium [a brace that allows you to stand up]. I got an apartment at Hawthorn Court. When I first moved in, I couldn’t get into the bathroom or the walk-in closet. But my manager took care of that for me by removing the doors. My car is operated with hand controls, like a motorcycle. I drive to campus, and they gave me a permit so I can park anywhere. I hate it, though, when the handicapped parking is on a hill, like at Music Hall. In Bessey, there is no handicapped bathroom so I have to go across the street. And that could take a half an hour! I wish that when people first see me, that they don’t just see the wheelchair, or they don’t look down on me.”

Rodney Gingerich, brain injury

“I was doing an internship with Nortel in West Des Moines. I was on Highway 30 going east and the roads were icy. Someone tried to pass me on the entrance ramp, supposedly. I was in a coma for seven days. When I woke, I couldn’t remember my parents’ names. Now I sometimes have trouble remembering dates and names. I could meet someone, and then two hours later I won’t remember their name. I had to re-learn everything: eating, going to the bathroom, my multiplication tables. Because of my injury I am much more aggressive. Also, I have trouble staying on task. Sometimes when I am speaking, I’ll interject something that makes completely no sense to my listener, because if I don’t, I’ll forget. Kind of like Tourette’s. Only a few times have I said something inappropriate. Before my accident, I could pass courses fairly easily, and now I have to work really hard. I have trouble connecting things now. I go through Disability Resources. I get extended testing time, and a private room for exams. I get a seat in the front of the room because I get easily distracted. I wish people wouldn’t think I’m stupid because I have a brain injury. I fear going out into the working world a lot. Now, I can always go to Disability Resources, but in the real world, where do I go?”
Katrina Landolt, deaf

"I was born deaf. I went to the Iowa School for the Deaf, and I grew up with other kids like me. My family hears normally so I do have to use my voice with them, and I do some lip reading. My mom knows some sign language, and my brother went to preschool at ISD, so he knows some sign language. The most difficult aspect of being a deaf college student is being on a huge campus where no one can sign, and I have to depend on myself to communicate with others. I have to advocate a lot more to let people know what I need, like an interpreter and a note-taker. Those are the only two I need for classes. When communicating with other people, I try and read lips or use paper and pen. Sometimes it would be nice if everyone just learned basic sign [ABCs], or just realize that I need time to understand what they are saying and to just have patience with me. And it's frustrating when people talk overly slow; talking normally is best, and I would just ask them to slow down if they were talking too fast. Really, being deaf hasn't limited me in any way; I can do everything that I want."
"I first found out in about fourth grade that I had a learning disability. My third grade teacher — every time I screwed up — she’d send me into the hall. I spent most of third grade in the hall. I have trouble putting sentences together and getting their meaning. My mother describes my learning disability like this: When people see the word, say, tree, they see a tree in their head. I don’t see that tree. At the beginning of the semester I have to go to the Disabilities Resource office to get a request for accommodations per class. I get time and a half for test time, and someone will read the exam to me. I also get the professors’ notes. I sometimes tape the lecture. There are professors at this university that tell me that this is a cop out, cheating. And I’ve also had really understanding professors who want to learn more about my disability. The ones that don’t understand, I try and get them to. It takes me considerably longer to read something. A normal person could read something in a half an hour and it would take me an hour and a half to read the same thing. I started out as an engineer. Now I’m a theatre major. I rely on my friends a lot to help me with my frustration. They encourage me not to give up. I try and spread awareness about learning disabilities. I want to let people know that they can do it. People in life learn many different ways, but if people really want to do something, they should let nothing get in their way.”