February 2011

Personal Struggles

Tyler Kingkade
Iowa State University

Laurel Scott
Iowa State University

John Lonsdale
Iowa State University

Kaitlin McKinney
Iowa State University

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Recommended Citation

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What if your best friend died? What if you suddenly couldn’t breathe? What would you do if you lost one of your legs? How would you handle going to a restaurant and not being able to order anything because your body couldn’t take it? For these four students, they deal with these obstacles every day, but their strength overcomes their struggles.

Photography ANNIE MCGUIRE & DAVID DERONG
Design SETH LUNSFORD
TJ Good spent his freshmen year at Iowa State perfecting his signature. Today that signature adorns a plaque on a memorial patio Tyler Anderson and some of Good’s friends helped build.
The week Good got sick, engineering majors were hunkered down studying for an extensive eight-hour exam, which lay ahead on Saturday. Their futures were riding on it, but Good knew he was going to pass, so he still wanted to hang out.

Good was in a billiard league that met Monday nights. He had a couple beers, but nothing that would have caused him to become ill. The following day he woke up shaking and vomiting. Good thought it was probably a fever or a bug, but his friends say he was never sick — never even a cold. Anderson drove him to the hospital Tuesday afternoon. “He didn’t even tell his parents because he thought it was just something minimal.”

It turned out to be anything but minimal: Good had bacterial meningitis, a rare bacterial infection usually found in young adults, and by 8:30 p.m. his body was bruising. He died before the stroke of midnight.

The next few days, Anderson dealt with not only his friend’s death, but also with his parents repeatedly calling to make sure Anderson himself was not getting sick. He was told a big indication of meningitis was a really bad headache. “Well I hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours, so obviously I have a headache,” Anderson laughs. “[It was] tough dealing with [the fact that] I’ll never see my best friend again and to also watch for my own health.”

Anderson watched Good’s picture appear on the 5 p.m. news programs, although only for a few seconds, right after they spent several minutes on Jon Lacina — the student whose body was finally found after he went missing for three months. One of Anderson’s friends vented her frustration that Good’s death was overshadowed by Lacina’s story on the Iowa State Daily website. The Daily ended up printing it word-for-word. Anderson disputed the notion he or any of his friends were bitter — they understood — he and his friends had been following that story just like everyone else in Ames.

Good’s involvement made it hard for an entire department to pick up and move on. Veishea was only days after the incident, and it was difficult for his engineering friends to continue studying for an important exam after losing a loved one.

But Good was a senior, he was on track to graduate and many of his friends graduated. While Anderson misses seeing his buddy around campus, he confesses he was mentally prepared “in a way” to not see him. However, it’s still difficult, Anderson says. “Just realizing how many areas of my life he was involved in, it was everything. From calling him on a random night to see what he’s up to… I mean it was just everything.”

In October another tragedy struck when sophomore Sam Kruger, an ASCE cabinet member who was friends with both Anderson and Good, died in an automobile accident driving from Northwest Iowa. “He was actually wearing one of these bracelets,” Anderson says, displaying a white silicone gel band on his wrist with Good’s name imprinted on it. “I hadn’t even begun to get over Travis and that hit me.”

Anderson had once before been forced to answer questions about a student’s death. During his freshman year at Iowa State, he made recruiting calls to seniors in high school. Although he knew nothing about the student who had stumbled into Lake LaVerne and drowned one night in 2007, it was all people wanted to know about.

The year 2010 didn’t see a record number of student deaths, with the total near a dozen, and none of being malicious. “I’ve always been one who’s surprised there’s not more [student deaths] just with how careless college students are,” Anderson says. “I can count back once a week when I could’ve died.”

Typically, the university does not allow memorials to be placed on campus, but Good’s well-known involvement helped his friends get permission to build a memorial patio outside Town Engineering Building. It’s placed next to the garage where Good spent hundreds of hours working on projects and was constructed using tig welding by people who Good taught to tig weld. Some of the sheet metal on the bottom of the table was donated and is in the form of teardrops. The plaque adorning the top of the table includes Travis’s signature, something he obsessively perfected during his freshman year of college.
I was most concerned about saving the favorite boots I had on. It was weird. I was like, ‘I hope they can save my boots, these are my favorite purple ones.’ I didn’t realize that I would lose my leg, or that I wouldn’t get my boot back.”

Danielle De Bruin, junior in agricultural business, was seven years old when she lost her right leg in a farming accident. “I slipped and fell, and the next thing I knew I was caught. I spent the next eight weeks in the hospital,” Danielle recalls. “And thankfully, I’m here today.”

It was four in the afternoon on October 11, 1997 when Danielle slipped, catching her leg in an auger (a machine that looks kind of like a tractor with an enormous drill bit attached) with her father just five feet away. “The tractor supplying power to the auger miraculously died otherwise I would have died,” Danielle says.

Danielle started out in a wheelchair and soon moved on to crutches, which she still uses today instead of a prosthetic leg. Sudden weather changes and stress trigger phantom limb pain in Danielle’s missing leg. Danielle explains, “There are times when I will be walking up stairs, and the phantom pain will make it feel like I’m walking up the stairs on two legs; it’s really weird to experience.”

For Danielle, the hardest thing about recovering from the accident was re-learning how to walk, how to carry things, go up and down stairs and open doors all at the same time. “[People] don’t realize I can do stuff for myself,” she says. “You know, it’s nice when people open the door for you, but you don’t have to run from twenty feet away to get the door. … If I need help, I’ll ask.”

She does wish farm safety courses would be taught to children at a younger age. According to the National Safety Council, agriculture is the most hazardous industry in the nation, with most injuries afflicting those who are younger than fifteen, or older than sixty-five. Danielle did not attend a farm safety course until the age of ten, which she says is typical.

Life on one leg doesn’t have to be depressing, however. Devon O’Brien, Danielle’s friend, says Danielle jokes around about her leg. “We were all at a friend’s house and my feet were cold, so I offered to get socks for everyone, and I was saying, ‘OK, so we need three pairs of socks,’ when Danielle piped up and said ‘I only need one sock!’ It was so funny because I don’t even think about it—she’s just a normal girl.” And Danielle says she doesn’t miss much about her former life on two legs, but she does miss being able to roughhouse and go on runs with her siblings.

Now that Danielle has only one foot, she donates the extra shoe she gets when she buys a new pair to the National Odd Shoe Exchange, a non-profit organization that is a source of footwear for those requiring only a single shoe, or shoes of differing sizes.

“I often wonder about what my life would’ve been like, but then it is just one of those what-if questions, so I just ignore it,” Danielle says. “It’s all good. Over time you’re just like ‘whatever.’”
The hands squeeze Katie Delzell’s rib cage as hard as they can until she can’t breathe anymore. The attacks usually only occur at night — it’s like they know when she’s lying down. The hands wrap around her for twenty minutes to an hour on average — only five minutes if she’s lucky. She hasn’t experienced any for months now, but she’s finally getting used to her condition.

Delzell, 19, has Devil’s Grip, a chronic condition she was diagnosed with in the late winter of her junior year of high school. It was the beginning of track season, and Delzell had pains in her chest. Fluid was building up in the lining of her heart and doctors found ulcers in her esophagus. She was fine for a few months. The symptoms went away until she started running again at the start of track season, and that’s when the hands started to squeeze.

For the average person, the muscles lining the lungs are supposed to expand and contract, but Delzell’s don’t expand the way they are supposed to. “It literally feels like you’re being squeezed,” Delzell explains. “It feels like someone’s standing right in front of me and squeezing my rib cage as hard as they can.”

The attacks generally come in cycles. She might have one or two attacks a day when her condition flares up. At one point, her episodes lasted for three weeks and another lasted for about three months. The attacks hadn’t bothered Delzell until this last summer.

“It was uncommon ‘cause I was standing,” she says. “They usually happen at night … not when I’m asleep, but they are triggered when I’m lying down. The longest one was an hour and a half. It’s not overly pleasant. My heart beats too fast.” An average person’s heart beats 100 times per minute while going up a flight of stairs, but Delzell’s doubles—a primary reason she doesn’t play sports anymore. “[But] it’s something I’m just used to now.”

Delzell not only struggles with Devil’s Grip; she also has a second heart condition diagnosed in May that is known as — get ready for it — supraventricular tachycardia. Delzell’s doctors are unsure if the two are linked; however, her Devil’s Grip tends to flare up more often when her other heart condition gets worse.

There is one medicine Delzell has on hand in preparation for an unexpected attack. It is supposed to slow her heart rate down, but Delzell says it hardly works.

“Some people hear my story and are a little freaked out,” Delzell says. “Two heart conditions by the age of 17… [it] sounds cliché, but I don’t feel my problems are as major as other people I know.”

Heart problems are prevalent in Delzell’s family; her grandmother is one of six that have all died of heart failure, her uncle had a heart attack at 34 and her cousin suffered complications from a hole in her heart. “It’s different now because most people whom I’m close to know [about it]. It’s a condition you can’t see. A lot of people don’t think it’s real. You don’t always know what’s going on, but just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t happening. It has definitely caused me to toughen up a lot. I used to be a cry-baby, but I’m certainly not anymore.”

Devil’s Grip, sometimes known as Bornholm disease, is a chronic disease Katie Delzell deals with. It feels like her muscles are squeezing on her rib-cage. But Dezell also has a heart condition, which is prevalent in her family.
Elise Grantham is not only a vegan, but has a gluten intolerance as well. Checking labels and researching how a restaurant cooks their food is a normal part of Grantham’s daily routine.
It seems common among students to complain about the lack of appetizing food Iowa State has to offer. We whine about the bland food at dining centers, and we are reluctant in spending more than a few dollars on a good meal when we dine out. For Elise Grantham, sometimes making the selection isn’t so easy. The same old-same old just won’t do.

In February 2010, Elise made a trip to her doctor to check out her thyroid problems related to an autoimmune disease, when the body attacks its own cells. In order to get a better understanding of why Elise was having issues with her thyroid, her doctor decided an allergy test would help. The result of the test concluded her allergies consisted of such foods as eggs, bananas, oranges and cheese. In addition to these foods, the doctors found one more allergy that would result in the biggest endeavor in Elise’s diet.

“My doctor tested all possible food groups for allergies, and gluten turned up to be one of them,” she explains. Since that doctor’s visit, Elise has been adapting to gluten intolerance.

“The most common symptoms of gluten intolerance without celiac disease are mainly limited to the gastrointestinal tract and include abdominal pains, cramps, diarrhea, and loss of appetite,” says Laura Kimm, a West Ames Hy-Vee dietician. “Celiac disease is a more serious form of gluten intolerance and is a genetic, inherited autoimmune disease that interferes with the digestion of important vitamins and minerals,” she says. Because the issue lies in the small intestine, vital nutrients will not be taken in by the body and can result in serious problems. “People who have this condition have an inability to absorb the nutrients from food so malnutrition can develop,” she explains.

Even though Elise and others with the disorder cannot actually feel what is not being absorbed into the small intestine, she could feel her stomach reacting. For those who are unaware they are gluten intolerant, every meal can be a nightmare. Abdominal pains, cramping and an uneasy stomach follow what seems like every meal or snack. Uncomfortable trips to the bathroom become frequent, and nothing can soothe your stomach. It can be terribly uncomfortable.

For Elise, her stomach pains became unbearable. “It [gets] to the point where I do not want to go anywhere. I just want to stay in bed,” she says. Oftentimes, these symptoms are what initially drive people to see their doctor. However, gluten intolerance can have more serious or even permanent distress if a strict, gluten-free diet is ignored. If Elise continued to include gluten in her diet, she could become infertile or acquire a vitamin deficiency leading to insufficient nourishment in her nervous system. Individuals who experience vitamin and nutrition deficiency often run into problems like malnutrition, as Kimm explained, and they can even develop autism.

Kristi Patel, assistant director for retail locations on campus, explains campus cafes and restaurants do not cater to gluten intolerant individuals. “We don’t have a specific menu for individuals with gluten-free needs. There are certainly products in our facilities that are gluten free, but we don’t have very many items that would normally contain gluten that are formulated to be gluten free,” she says. Because Iowa State does not offer specific gluten-free menus, a simple stop at the Hub for lunch between classes probably isn’t the best idea for people like Elise.

People with gluten intolerance find that structuring an appropriate meal can be a struggle, and for students on campus, finding a dining center or café that caters to their allergy can be frustrating. While Iowa State does not offer specific gluten-free menus at cafes and restaurants like the Memorial Union Food Court, C-Stores or Clyde’s, there is relief.

“[Iowa State] houses a dietitian to take care of our residential students’ dietary needs,” says Jill Magnuson-Arroyo, associate director for residential dining. “She meets one-on-one with the students and reviews menu choices and menu alterations, so students end up with food that tastes good.”

However, Elise differs from most gluten intolerant individuals in that she also lives a vegan lifestyle, meaning she doesn’t consume or use animal products. She has been eating a vegetarian diet since she was four. Now, at age 20, Elise has been on a vegan diet for almost a year. Living a vegan lifestyle may appear to only make her food choices more difficult, but Elise finds it helpful. “I’m already used to having to be aware and look at ingredients. [You are] just conscious on what [is in food].” Looking at ingredients has become second nature to Elise.

It is fortunate for ISU students that the university provides options and resources, but what about off-campus? Out of the many restaurants located in Ames, Elise finds her favorite gluten-free dishes at The Spice, a Thai restaurant located on Main Street. After numerous requests that meals be prepared gluten-free, Tanita Eamkajornsiri, manager of The Spice, decided a gluten-free menu should be offered. “We’re always trying very hard to accommodate our existing customers with their requests,” Eamkajornsiri explains. “We want to make it easy for our customers to enjoy their food at The Spice while [satisfying] their needs in terms of their allergies.”

Fortunately for Elise, on the scale of intolerance, she is low to moderate. She is not to the point that her foods need to be cooked in separate pans. But Elise still finds it upsetting to avoid the foods she once enjoyed. “I love bread and beer,” she laughs, “so that’s sad.” Elise can still dine out with her friends, but it’s usually a different routine. “I tend to not go out to eat, [but] when friends want to, I’ll eat ahead of time and get soup or something at the restaurant.”

Gluten intolerance is genetic. “My mom has it [too],” Elise discloses. “When I got tested, so did she.” When Elise heads home for a break from Ames, she finds it easier to find food around the house, dealing with both vegan and gluten-free diet limitations. She chose to be a vegan for ethical reasons, not diet and health reasons. “I think being vegan is a lot easier than having a gluten intolerance,” she explains.

Fortunately, Elise does have options with her gluten intolerance, and as a vegan, there’s a wide variety of animal-free dishes to choose from. But even with this silver lining, it is still tiresome for Elise to have to limit her food choices. “As Americans, we congregate and socialize over food, so it has been a struggle to have to worry about my food restriction when I just want to hang out with my friends,” she says. 