

Up until recently, I never fully understood the magnitude of Alport Syndrome or the effect it has had on my life. Growing up, I was always told by my parents and doctors that I was a little different from everyone else. Every six months or so I'd have to travel an hour away from home to the children's hospital in Hartford, CT for routine checkups with my nephrologist. Most of my friends, however, didn't need to travel to routine visits with specialists. In fact, none of my friends even knew what a nephrologist was or understood the role they played in my life. None of my friends understood what it was like to have hearing aids and most of them didn't grow up taking medication every day, morning and night. I always felt a little isolated, like there was no one who really understood me. I learned on my own how to embrace my uniqueness and help others understand what makes me different.

My hearing has been my biggest strength and my biggest weakness. Around the age of 10, the words "What?" and "Huh?" had become major pieces of my conversational vocabulary. My family, teachers, and peers were impatient with my inability to hear and were always making jokes, not realizing it was a legitimate disability. When I finally had my hearing tested by an audiologist, we realized it was more serious than we thought. At age 10, I was diagnosed with 40% hearing loss in both ears and was immediately fitted for hearing aids. The hearing aids were a big adjustment for me. Throughout middle school, I lacked the motivation to wear them. I tried to fight off my differences instead of embracing them. I told myself I could be fine without my hearing aids, when in reality, I needed their help.

My high school experience, however, has been much different from the small elementary/middle school that I came from. The high school I attend is home to 2,400 students in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. I went from having 22 classmates to having over 600. My new teachers and classmates were completely unaware of my hearing loss, and I had no idea how to communicate the depth of my impairment to anyone. In order to compensate for my disability, I had to learn how to advocate for myself. I had to stay on top of my schoolwork and pay close attention in class so I wouldn't miss anything the teacher might have said. My hearing impairment has forced me to sharpen my work ethic while growing increasingly self-reliant and independent. I have had high honors for the past three years of my high school career and was inducted into the National Honor's Society this past spring. In addition to improving my work ethic, Alports has taught me how to love myself and communicate better with my peers. I no

longer struggle with accepting my hearing loss. I'm not ashamed to tell other people about my deficient hearing or damaged kidneys. Physically and spiritually it is a natural part of me.

In early October of my freshmen year, I tried out for my school's dance team and ended up making the team. I have had a passion for dance since I was young, and was ecstatic about prolonging my passion throughout my high school career. During dance team performances, I often had trouble hearing the music, but I quickly learned how to adapt and use the little music I could hear to keep the dance going. I also had several instances in which my hearing aids would fall out during routines, but I improvised by using choreography to pick them up. Proud to say, I have danced for the NFA Dance Team for all four years at Norwich Free Academy.

Another passion of mine is working with kids. I work at a daycare afterschool three to four days a week. I work primarily with infants, whom I've grown to adore. I have chosen to incorporate my passion into the occupation I will be pursuing. I will be majoring in nursing, and eventually furthering my education in a Neonatal Nurse Practitioner program. I want to work hands on in the NICU with premature and ill infants. I wish to win this award so that I can use this toward my education and making my academic and professional dreams a reality. With the financial help of this award, I will not only be pursuing a passion of mine, but a career that could help countless other children realize their life too can be heard, just like mine has been.