

Tibial hemimelia. To most, this sounds like medical jargon that you only hear about in medical school or maybe in a specialized case study. It is by some considered a “one-in-a-million” condition that causes a shortened or absent tibia bone. Other abnormalities associated with this condition include a non-functioning ankle joint or deformation of corresponding limbs, both of which can lead to amputation of the affected leg. For the past twenty years, I have not only described this oddity, but I have been living it. My first-time parents were eager to bring their child into this world, although my mother often describes my birth as a day, she will never forget for reasons other than happiness. The minute I was born, I was rushed away by nurses and doctors to not panic my young parents. However, my father, who was a registered nurse knew that these actions by healthcare staff meant something was not going according to plan. After finally getting a form of explanation, my parents wept as they faced possibly the hardest challenge posed to any nervous parent; the unknown. Doctors and specialists initially explained that with this diagnosis, amputation was the most prominent action as I would most likely never be able to walk due to the severity of my condition.

It was not until I had an appointment with a pediatric orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Fleissner, who finally told them what they had been hoping to hear throughout all my young life. He told them that their dreams of watching me run, dance, and one day walk across a stage to receive my diploma - all on my own two feet, would be a reality. He was the physician that assessed that not only was my tibia bone present in my right leg, but so was a fullfunctioning ankle joint. Dr. Fleissner frequently and adoringly called me “one-in-a-million of one-in-amillion”. My parents say they will never forget watching me take my first steps, and that they will also never regret giving me the opportunity to keep my right leg. I continually saw Dr. Fleissner throughout my childhood and instead of hating the doctor’s office, I grew to love it. Dr. Fleissner and his staff were the equivalent of superheroes in my eyes and were trusted and loved influences on my childhood development. When I was eight years old, I underwent a leg lengthening surgery that involved a surgical “break” through my tibia bone. An external fixator was then placed with pins through my bones that had to be cranked daily in order to re-break and lengthen the bone, muscles and tendons. Every day these cranks would result in extensions to eventually make up the difference between my right and left legs. The pain was excruciating, and something that will live in me forever and serve as a reminder to my own internal strength. Throughout this procedure and recovery process, I never feared the doctor’s office; I felt more comfortable in that

accepting and healing environment where I knew I was not judged or stared at. Every time I would visit Dr. Fleissner, he would ask me if I had a "boyfriend", to which I would always giggle hysterically. He would also ask the go-to question to every child: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" To which, I would always respond with "a doctor, just like you". Now as an adult, I reflect on many of my interactions with Dr. Fleissner. To him, I may have just been another child patient that he saw once a year; but to me, he was a hero who never doubted me from the beginning. He gave my childhood so much light and guidance that he would probably and humbly brush off as him doing his job, but to me, this gave hope, inspiration and motivation to be something beyond diagnosis and disabilities.

The question of "why medical school" has been answered for years, and that answer has resided inside me all along. I want to go to medical school to become that unknowing light in others' lives, I want to be a "superhero" to those who need it most, and I want to prove to myself that this was what I was put in this world to do. I have been preparing, studying, and learning under so many influential physicians and mentors in the past years, to better myself for this life that I so desperately want to live and to give. I know that medicine is more than just helping others; it is virtually becoming the very change you wish to see in the world. Becoming a doctor means more to me than any hardship of studying or tests, because becoming a doctor is all that I have ever wanted. I was a child who loved seeing and visiting the hospital because it was where I felt that I belonged, unjudged. It seemed as no coincidence to me and suiting that I took my MCAT exam across from the office where I went to my first appointment with Dr. Fleissner. I want to face the challenge of becoming a physician head on, with the determination that I have possessed my entire life. I recently encountered Dr. Fleissner and I realized that maybe he did not wear a cape and did not fly home after work- but I also realized that never mattered to begin with. He was those things to my younger self, and that was all that truly mattered. He was my superhero. He was everything I wanted to be, and now everything I aspire to be. I want to take this chance on my dream even if it is "one-in million of one-in-a-million".