



Claudia Martinez

"Because of [Chiari], I now fully understand what a patient needs. As I continue working with patients, I see how my experience unites me with them, providing an unspeakable bond in which they know I've been in their shoes. I never thought I'd spend so much time in a hospital bed, much less while working toward becoming a physician, but it's been an invaluable experience that can never be learned."

Claudia organized the Houston, TX walk during Conquer Chiari Walk Across America 2013 and 2014.

July, 2014 - Claudia Martinez wants every Chiarian to know that we should not let Chiari rule over our lives, and even more so, our dreams. To Claudia, life is a beautiful gift and not something that anyone should take lightly or for granted. She then explains that all of us know our condition gives us a different view of the world, but we still experience life individually and create separate meanings of life. By determining and understanding this philosophical belief, Claudia was determined that Chiari was not going to rule over her life and interfere with her dream of becoming a doctor— specifically, a neonatologist.

Claudia's Chiari journey quickly began after her family's car was rear-ended in May of 2011. She recalled that the individual driving the other vehicle was going at least 70 miles per hour and forcefully slammed into their car while texting. The driver was too distracted to look up and see that her family had slowed down to turn. About five minutes after the collision, Claudia started having horrible headaches. A few days later, she was required to undergo an MRI scan which revealed an abnormally wide 10mm Chiari malformation.

Claudia remembers that at first the pain was controllable and the symptoms were tolerable; however, everything changed as time passed. Most of her symptoms included severe headaches, loss of feeling in hands and feet, trembling of the hands and feet, dizziness, weight-loss, vomiting, nausea, blackouts, and pulsatile tinnitus. As with other countless Chiari patients, pain medications did very little to help her; she spent two years impaired and oftentimes had to lay in bed day after day, frozen with pain.

"At first doctors didn't really know what to do with me. As I got worse, I went from doctor to doctor. Some said it was whiplash from the accident. Some said I was just stressed because I wanted to get into medical school and they knew how stressful that was. Some said I was depressed because they knew I wanted to get into medical school and they thought I felt like I didn't believe in myself. Some said it was just anxiety. In the end I concluded 99% of those doctors didn't even know what Chiari was. It wasn't until I found my neurosurgeon, Dr. Dong Kim, that it was clear everything was coming from my Chiari malformation," said Claudia.

The day of Claudia's first surgery in August of 2012 was bittersweet because it fell on the first day of the fall semester at the University of Houston.

"I wouldn't be walking the halls with my classmates; instead I'd be entering the doors of the operating room to undergo the first of many brain surgeries I'd have to endure. I knew suffering with [Chiari] would be a long journey, but it was a journey that further fueled my passion to become a doctor," said Claudia.

Working to become a neonatologist has become a beautiful reality for Claudia since she graduated from the University of Houston in 2013 where she studied biology and chemistry. She is now attending the University of Texas Medical School at Houston to pursue her wonderful dream.

One reason that she decided to become a neonatologist was because of her twin cousins. Back in 2009, her cousin delivered the babies at only 24 weeks gestation and at first, they were given just hours to live. Yet, thanks to their team of doctors, they lived and are now healthy 5 year olds. Claudia applauds neonatologists because they give children a chance to live life and she wants to devote her life to giving the most helpless hope. They may not be able to do much for themselves or others, but Claudia wants to do everything for them.

In Claudia's opinion, Dr. Kim helped her regain control over her life so she could attend medical school and start her journey to become a doctor. She wants to give babies a chance at life to live and follow their dreams as she was able to do.

"Few students can say they were a patient, but because of [Chiari], I now fully understand what a patient needs. As I continue working with patients, I see how my experience unites me with them, providing an unspeakable bond in which they know I've been in their shoes. I never thought I'd spend so much time in a hospital bed, much less while working toward becoming a physician, but it's been an invaluable experience that can never be learned," said Claudia.

Since her first surgery in August of 2012, Claudia has endured a total of six surgeries at Memorial Hermann Hospital in the Houston Texas Medical Center and she cannot thank Dr. Kim enough for giving her a feeling of normalcy. She also cannot wait to help her own patients the way that he helped her. Furthermore, she is almost off of her medications since her symptoms have resolved and as much as she wants to push her limits, sometimes feeling normal is the best feeling in the world.

In closing, Claudia had this to say:

"I want people to know there is hope. I feel as if I have won the lottery. There was times I thought I wasn't going to make it; times I thought, 'if this is how I am going to live then I am in full acceptance of death.' But no

matter how bad the situation seems, you have to always believe that things will get better.”



Jennifer Eubanks

Chiari Community Columnist

Ms. Eubanks is a professional writing and research scholar from Purdue University Northwest. After being diagnosed with a Chiari I Malformation in 2011, she quickly decided that being conquered was not an option—she was committed to fight and pursue a budding love of healthcare/medical writing. Spreading awareness and hope to others battling Chiari is her largest motivator alongside educating others who have not heard about the condition. Reporting for Ideas in Motion Media and tutoring at the Writing Center (Purdue University North Central) has been immensely beneficial to her success as well as all the remarkable individuals who helped her become the composer and analyst she is today.

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