

College Student, Competitive Swimmer, Chiari Conqueror

September 30, 2007 - Kelly deMarrais is a student at Virginia Tech, a competitive swimmer and a great Chiari story...

How would you describe yourself before you became affected by Chiari? In other words, were you physically active, etc.

Before I became affected by Chiari, I was very active with sports. I was playing softball, basketball, field hockey, and swimming. I loved being on a team and competing.

When did you first notice symptoms and what were they?

I first noticed symptoms after I came home from a 7th grade school dance towards the end of the school year. I had to lay down because my head was hurting so badly, but I thought it was just from dancing. The head aches/head pains that I was getting only occurred once a week in the beginning. But as time passed and I was heading into 8th grade, I soon realized that these pains were abnormal and weren't caused by doing any certain activity. As more time passed, I got more symptoms, before I knew it, my hands were going numb for no reason, my feet and fingers felt like pins and needles, and shooting head pains occurred almost every minute.

Were you diagnosed quickly, or did it take awhile?

I was diagnosed rather quickly. I went to my doctor at the beginning of 8th grade and told him that I was having head pains for no reason and he scheduled me for an MRI. I found out right away that I had Chiari malformation.

Was the decision to have surgery easy for you, or were you unsure about it?

The decision to have surgery was probably one of the hardest decisions my family and I had to make. I was not sure how much the surgery would work, if it would even help, or how it would affect my swimming career and my life. It took me over a year and a half to finally decide to get the surgery. I wanted to wait till I had a break with swimming and wouldn't have to worry about missing any school work.

What did your doctor tell you about whether you'd be able to return to competitive sports?

The doctor told me that if all went well that I would be able to return to swimming in no time. He said that swimming would actually help in my recovery as well, because it would help me build my neck muscles and rotation back up.

What was your recovery from surgery like?

Recovery from surgery took a little longer than I expected. I had never had any kind of surgery before, so I didn't have much of an idea what it would be like. It took 2 full months for all my symptoms and everything to go away. I had to do a lot of therapy to work on building up strength to be able to move my head, and rotate my head in both directions. But, once all my symptoms fully went away, I felt better than ever. It was weird not getting head pains, or having my hand and feet have pins and needles, I had always thought that that would have to be something that I would just have to live with for the rest of my life.

Can you talk a little bit about your swimming?

I have been swimming competitively since the age of 6 and have been swimming all year round (have a total of basically 1 month off a year) since the age of 8. I qualified for YMCA Nationals at the age of 12 and attended that meet until I was a senior in High School. The summer before going to college, I was a YMCA National Champion in the 200 Long Course Meter Backstroke. I swam for Somerset Valley YMCA in NJ and currently swim at Virginia Tech. I am the current record holder at Virginia Tech in the 200 yard backstroke.

Did you always feel like you'd be able to go back to it?

I was quite hesitant as to whether or not I'd be able to get back into swimming, especially at the level that I had been competing at prior to surgery. I was not able to dive into the water until 3 months after surgery. But I achieved all best times in most of my best events after only 4 months after having surgery, that was something that I never expected. I had hoped that I would go within a few seconds of my best times, I never imagined dropping time.

How do you feel now, are you 100%, and how is the swimming going?

I definitely feel 100% now, I cannot tell you how much surgery has truly helped me with not only swimming and athletics, but being able to enjoy life as well. My doctor truly changed my life for the better. I now am able to live pain free. Swimming is going well, I am currently trying to make an Olympic Trial cut in the 200 Long Course Meter Backstroke, I am only 8 tenths off the cut.

What would you say to other Chiari people facing the prospect of surgery?

I think surgery is definitely worth getting. It changed my life in so many ways, and I am now able to do a lot of things I was never able to do without pain when I had symptoms or head pains.

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