

Teen Honoree

Abbey Dombrowski

Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis

As a small toddler, Abbey Dombrowski had quite the tumble down a flight of stairs. However, as months passed, Abbey's parents noticed that their little girl was still experiencing stiffness and swelling in her legs. Upon visits to the pediatrician and orthopedic specialist, 2 ½ year old Abbey was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. This diagnosis came as a complete shock to the family, not understanding how a little baby could have arthritis.

Most of Abbey's life has been about doctor visits, physical therapy, daily medication, surgeries and pain. The nearly 300,000 children with juvenile arthritis and rheumatic conditions make an estimated 621,000 health care profession visits every year. Abbey has taken a plethora of different medications, trying to find the best regimen. Many of the medications have harsh side effects such as nausea, vomiting, hair loss, weight gain and weakened immune system. Abbey even has experienced an adverse reaction to an infusion treatment resulting in anaphylaxis.

She has missed many days of school throughout her childhood, affecting not only her grades but her social interactions with her peers as well. "It's hard for my classmates to understand just how difficult living with this illness can be," said Abbey. She has undergone 16 procedures or surgeries, including draining fluid, injections, inserting a metal plate or bone grafts on her knees. Left scarred, physically and emotionally, Abbey had to finally stop playing the sport she loves most – basketball. "I spent my middle school career known as 'that girl in the wheel chair.' After every surgery my parents would make me go to school, with what I thought at the time, was disgusting stitches for everyone to see. I remember in the 6th grade begging my mom to let me wear an ace bandage instead of airing out my stitches. I cried and cried because I didn't want to be noticed even more. I was afraid of being made fun of. Middle school was a terrible experience for me. It was hard not being able to run around and do normal things kids my age were doing."

However, during the summer of 2005, Abbey's constant feeling of "being left out" changed when she attended the Arthritis Foundation's Camp Dakota in Lapeer, MI. Camp Dakota is a medically supervised camp where children with juvenile arthritis or related rheumatic conditions can spend a week during the summer making new friends, learn more about managing their disease, enjoy fun activities and create lasting memories. "Without Camp Dakota, I wouldn't have been able to meet my two very best friends, Victoria and Taylor. They are my biggest cheerleaders, motivators and always there to listen and understand just when I need them. It is incredible what a difference Camp Dakota has made in my life," said Abbey. She has attended Camp Dakota every year since, except for one where it coincided with a scheduled surgery. Abbey is very excited to be returning again this summer as a camp counselor.

Abbey's continuous battle with arthritis has led this 18-year-old St. Clair, MI resident committed to helping others and optimistic about her future. She is actively involved with community workshops and mentorship programs that help ladies build self-esteem. Abbey believes sharing her personal story about her own struggles with self-esteem, while fighting arthritis, will make a difference in someone's life.



Abbey has participated in the Walk to Cure Arthritis events since she was four years old.

"It is an incredible, fun event where everyone comes together for such an amazing cause. I wake up every day in pain, and I go to sleep every night in pain. Some of the most challenging and frustrating things about having arthritis is not being able to simple things, like opening a jar or not being able to wear a favorite pair of jeans or shoes because there is too much swelling. It's the day to day things that sometimes get you the most," said Abbey. "But, I live each day with a smile on my face and a positive, optimistic attitude, regardless of the amount of pain that I am experiencing. Giving up is not an option. I hope that other people with arthritis can continue to fight their battle against this disease and not give up. Stay strong!"

Join [Team Abbey](#) for the 2016 Detroit Walk to Cure Arthritis to support Abbey and the 300,000 children in the U.S. battling arthritis.