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Twenty Seconds of Courage

The day that I was diagnosed with Alopecia Areata changed my life. I had never heard of Alopecia until the day I was diagnosed. I was in the seventh grade and I remember waking up one morning and finding hair all over my pillow. Then, over the course of a very short time period, I noticed small quarter size balding spots appearing on the back of my head. I was terrified. My parents took me to the dermatologist and that was when I was given my life-changing news. Within six months, I had lost all of my hair, including eyebrows and eyelashes.

 Alopecia is an autoimmune disease where your cells attack your hair follicles causing the hair to fall out. There are three different types of Alopecia: Areata, Totalis, and Universalis. In the five years that I have had this disease, I have experienced all three of them. Many people mistake it for cancer. Alopecia is nothing like cancer - it is life-altering, not life-threatening. Alopecia is frustrating because you are constantly looking for answers that are not there. There is no cure but there are different treatments that have been deemed successful in producing new hair growth. One treatment that doctors praise is to use steroid shots. I once had fifty shots in my head. The pain was excruciating, but I was desperate to see some kind of improvement.

Living with Alopecia is a day to day struggle. It is highly unpredictable. One day I would start seeing new growth and another day I would find a bald patch. It has taught me to not take anything for granted because life can change in the blink of an eye. In middle school and in most of high school, I wore a wig and used it to hide who I truly was. I felt alone. I would act as if nothing was wrong, lying to the people closest to me. I realized that I was just wishing away life when I should be living it.

Last summer, after having Alopecia for four years, I decided to attend the annual Alopecia Conference. I had finally felt comfortable enough with myself to go to the conference. As I walked into the hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, all I saw were smiling bald people. It was great; for once I didn’t feel like the freak with patchy hair. I finally fit in. I made so many friends and learned a lot as well. I will never forget the weekend I spent there, and I plan to attend the conference for years to come.

During the conference I attended several seminars. One common theme during the conference was that people who have Alopecia need to “Own” it, “be proud of who you are and don’t let your hair define you”. I wanted so desperately to own it, but that is easier said than done. Then, I attended a break out session called “Dare to be Bare”. I could relate to the struggles and challenges the speakers spoke about, but one speaker in particular, inspired me. They spoke about how they first “came out” to their friends and coworkers and quoted the following from the movie *We Bought A Zoo*: “You know sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage, just literally 20 seconds of embarrassing bravery, and I promise you something great will come of it.” Going into my senior year of high school, I knew I had to make a change. After going to the conference, I felt more comfortable to go without my wig and I was determined to not wear it on the first day of school. With the support of my family and friends I was able to do it. Walking into high school on the first day of senior year with no wig, patchy hair at best, changed my life. Though it felt a little more than just twenty seconds, I am so glad I did it even though it was one of the most terrifying things I have ever done. Though each day can still be a challenge, I can definitely be more myself and let all of my insecurities go.

The world has created this image of ideal beauty as being flawless, but no one is perfect. I have accepted that I am different and I am more confident in myself now, than I’ve ever been. I don’t let people’s comments or stares affect me like they used to and instead I try to educate them about Alopecia. I understand now that God gave me this condition because he knew I could handle it and that it would make me a stronger person. He was right. I am a strong, determined, woman now. If I had never gotten Alopecia, it would have taken me longer to realize the truly important things in life and trust me, hair isn’t one of them. There are days when it gets hard to stay above the negativity, but I am better because of it.