

“Do you have socks? Because we’re going ice skating.” Most twenty-five year old girls would not have thought twice about how to answer this question, but it caught me completely off guard. I’ve had two major knee surgeries in the past year and a half, so I was a bit nervous as to how my knees would hold up during this date. I was very pleasantly surprised that this guy had taken the time to plan something more special than drinks, and he was clearly enthusiastic about taking a Miami native ice-skating as he shared that ice-skating was a big part of his childhood up north. On top of that, he was taking me to the ice skating rink in the basement of the coolest new hotel on South Beach—how could I say no? I figured I would give it a try for thirty minutes or so. I knew that if I did it, I would spend the rest of my weekend with ice—ice on my knees. However, I thought the experience would be worth it. I felt comfortable with my decision, and with that I laced up my skates.

When I stepped onto the ice and attempted to glide, my legs shook. I felt like a fool for not recognizing the difficulty of this task. Aside from strengthening my leg muscles in physical therapy during my recovery, I have avoided exercise for the past five years. Any physical exertion of my lower extremities was just too painful. My knee problems have defined my young twenties, and I worried that they would define the rest of my life.

My journey to find a solution to my knee pain and my time that night on the ice had one common theme: I did not give up. I asked to hold my date’s hand so that I wouldn’t fall. I explained to him that I’ve had two knee surgeries in the past year and a half, and that’s why this was a bit tough for me. I felt embarrassed at my lack of physical prowess. He couldn’t possibly have known all that I had been through, and I didn’t want to tell him. It’s not a fun story to tell, and I don’t care to relive it with someone I don’t know very well. Moreover, all I could think about while on the ice is how my mom, dad, and physical therapist would all be upset with me for making such a stupid decision. I was sure that I would be in pain for two weeks, which would make my day-to-day life difficult. I was upset with myself for making a decision that would inevitably harm me. After thirty minutes, I told my date that it probably wouldn’t be wise for me to continue any further. We took off our skates, and continued our night.

I woke up the next morning and began my normal routine: made tea, cooked breakfast, and got dressed. It wasn’t until later that day when it hit me—I felt no different than I did the day before. No buckling. No pins and needles. Not even weakness! I had no knee pain! My body didn’t even realize that it exerted itself physically more than normal. It was a miracle.

Before my knee surgeries, it was almost necessary to mention my knee problems in conversation to explain why I couldn’t do something. I almost dreaded introducing myself to new people because I didn’t want to talk about it or have to explain it. It always inevitably came up that I could not take stairs, do physical activity, or walk more than a few short blocks. When I hung out with new people, I was the girl that could never walk four blocks from one bar to the other and had to take a cab. Surrounded by low-budget twenty-somethings, I felt like nobody ever wanted to go anywhere with me because it meant spending unnecessary money on transportation. I felt like a burden on everyone.

Every social plan was impacted by my knee problems. It was difficult for me to attend parties because most of my friends lived in walk-ups. Whenever I was invited to a party, I had to ensure that there would be someone there who could give me a piggyback ride up the stairs. I received more piggyback rides from strangers (well, friends of friends) than one could ever imagine, to the point that my friends often joked that I should start a blog about it. I did not want to socialize with others my age because I neither wanted to have to explain my situation nor be a burden on anyone.

During my years of knee pain, there was so much I couldn't do. It hit me very hard while spending a semester abroad in Madrid during my junior year of college. I spent many nights crying because I couldn't make it up the stairs to my accommodations when traveling on the weekend to other nearby European cities. I couldn't walk around on field trips to historical Spanish sights with the other students in my study abroad program. Despite continuing my physical therapy while in Spain, my knee problems persisted when I returned to the U.S. I could only take handicap accessible public transportation in New York City, where I resided at the time, and my commute was unnecessarily long because I could only use subway stops that were handicap accessible. When I visited a friend in Washington D.C., I couldn't visit many of the monuments because they had too many steps. I didn't want to travel anymore because I was met with obstacles everywhere I turned.

I felt like others were always watching me and wondering why a young girl with no cast or visible handicap needed accommodations. During my college classes, I had to ask my professors if I could elevate my knees because it hurt too much to sit in a normal chair during a lecture. When I started my first corporate job in New York City, I had to wear sneakers in the office with my business casual outfits. When I went to Disney World with friends, I had to ride around on a motor scooter because the magnitude of the walking was too much. When my parents took me on a cruise to Europe for my college graduation, I had to use a wheelchair to get around every city. People observed with looks of confusion as the young girl in the wheelchair boarded the ship in a special line with elderly people also in wheelchairs. My knee problems impacted every aspect of my life, no matter how big or small.

Currently, a year and a half after my first surgery and six months after my second, these anecdotes seem like distant memories. I cannot believe how little I think about my knees now, especially because they used to be the center of my universe. My journey has been long; I went to eleven orthopedic surgeons, and only one of them knew what to do. One doctor wanted to operate on me and do something that I later learned would have majorly impaired me. Another doctor told me I was experiencing pain out of proportion and suggested that I had a nerve problem. She recommended having a nerve block, after which I suffered nerve damage for nine months. Evidently, patella femoral knee pain in women is the most difficult orthopedic problem to treat as my current surgeon asserts.

I feel eternally grateful to have found Dr. John Fulkerson as he and the pioneering work of the PatelloFemoral Foundation gave me my life back. I often think of how lucky I am that I was able to travel to Connecticut so that he could operate on me. The Foundation's

work is crucial because it conducts research with the goal of helping those who suffer from patella femoral pain and educates other doctors about how to treat it. I cannot even wrap my head around the fact that I was able to go ice-skating, which I have since learned is extremely demanding on the knees, and have no pain the next day. This experience was the catalyst for this reflection as it made me realize that I have a life to live and opportunities to look forward to, and that is the greatest gift of all.