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Brandeis senior is Arthritis Walk ambassador

Posted September 8, 2009 12:30 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

According to Rebecca Miller, a 21-year-old senior at Brandeis University who has lived with juvenile idiopathic (formerly rheumatoid) arthritis for the past 14 years, arthritis stinks.

But, she said she's not complaining; she's being honest.

"I'm used to [the pain]," said Miller, who grew up in Maryland. "I always say, 'It hurts either way, so I'm not going to sit in bed when I could be out having fun.'"

The condition, which affects around one in every 246 children under age 16 in the country, causes joint pain, swelling and stiffness, can limit range of motion and can slow a child's growth rate.

Since Miller was diagnosed with the autoimmune disease – for which there is no known cure or prevention – she has not let its painful symptoms hold her back.

As an 8-year-old on a beach vacation with her family, Miller spiked a high fever and her ankles swelled causing her to have difficulty walking. Shortly thereafter, Miller was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, which she said happened "really out of the blue."

When doctors told her of the diagnosis Miller had not previously heard of, and knew nothing about, the condition. She was told continuing to compete in gymnastics – one of her childhood passions – might be more painful.

Miller recalls immediately saying, "I'm not quitting," and thought, "I won't let this stop me from having fun."

She continued competing in gymnastics for five more years, only leaving the sport because she found new interests, not because of her arthritis.

In fact, Miller said the disease has never prevented her from doing whatever it is she has wanted to do, and points to her busy schedule as an example.

Besides being a full-time student who is double-majoring in biology and psychology and is in the midst of applying to a "long list" of graduate schools, Miller is an emergency medical technician at Brandeis, is on the ski team, dances, sings and does theater. She also works as a teacher's assistant and as a lab technician in the school's biology laboratory.

Sometimes, she said, it takes a little more effort to bear through the pain and symptoms, which can worsen with increased activity and combined with her medicine can cause fatigue.

"But usually I take a painkiller and go have fun," she said.

Miller attributes her interest in science and medicine to having arthritis and

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wanting to learn more about her condition. She spent this past summer researching arthritis of the spine during a summer internship at the National Institute of Health in Maryland.

Though she enjoys the research aspect, her ultimate goal is to work one-on-one with people to help them overcome their various forms of arthritis as a physical therapist.

She also plans to continue her educational and awareness efforts about childhood arthritis.

“Most people are like ‘You have arthritis? You’re 21; you’re not old.’ ... But it’s not just an ‘old-person’ disease,” she said.

Since leaving her home to attend Brandeis, Miller has been involved with and walked in the Boston Arthritis Walk. This year, she will serve as one of two “Walk Ambassadors” at the event – a role she described as “a really big honor.”

The 13th Annual Boston Arthritis Walk will be held at the Prudential Center on Sept. 13. The walk is for all ages and abilities and includes one or three-mile walks along the Esplanade, followed by a post-walk party.

Miller is also an advocate of “Let’s Move Together,” an initiative of the Arthritis Foundation designed to educate people with arthritis about the importance of staying physically active.

Though arthritis may stink, Miller said there’s a positive side to everything and having childhood arthritis has made her the person she is today.

“I don’t get upset and think like ‘What would it have been like without [JRA],” she said. “You’ve got to fight it and have fun anyway.”

You can read Miller’s story in her own words, [here](#).

For more information on the Boston Arthritis Walk, or to register, visit www.bostonarthritiswalk.org, email mhalpin@arthritis.org or call (617) 219-8221.

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