

During my freshman year of college, my friends and I had participated in a 32-hour Dance Marathon event. Tired like everyone else after, I came back to my dorm, and fell asleep. I woke up in the hospital frightened and confused. That night, I had a generalized tonic clonic seizure which woke up my roommate. She got the RA, called 911 and all my new friends saw me being rolled out on a stretcher. When I got back to the dorm the next day, I never brought it up. I was extremely embarrassed and hoped it would never happen again.

Except it did happen again. About a year later, a second seizure happened in my sleep. That's when my parents decided I should transfer to a local university to be closer to home, so we could figure out what was going on. I was crushed to leave my independent life, all my friends, and move home.

While living at home, I continued with school and I started seeing a neurologist, where I heard the word "epilepsy" for the first time. I underwent some tests, hoping for answers, but everything came back normal. I was started on medications, but there was no guarantee my seizures would stop. However, I did not let my diagnosis stop me from pursuing the opportunity to travel across the country to work on Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

Months later during the campaign, my seizures came back and have been in my life ever since. I began having focal impaired awareness seizures, triggered by lack of sleep and stress. Thankfully, I was able to continue working with colleagues that supported me through my seizures. They helped when I needed it, especially with driving, since I no longer could on my own.

After the campaign, I returned home and continued to try different medications, and eventually was cleared to drive. I was working as a campaign manager when my life was changed forever. One moment I was driving to drop off yard signs and the next I was standing in the street. I had a seizure which led to a car accident. Thankfully, everyone was okay but that was the last time I've driven a car. Scarred from this event, the idea of driving scares me to this day.

Shortly after the accident, I received an offer from the White House to serve in the Obama Administration. I quickly moved to Washington, D.C., and was fortunate to continue helping others through my work in the Office of Public Engagement. Due to a stressful job, my seizures continued and became more frequent. However, living in a walkable city with access to public transportation allowed me to live independently. I again found myself working in a supportive environment and I was able to educate colleagues in the White House about seizure first aid.

Five years after being diagnosed, I had yet to meet anyone else living with epilepsy, which felt very isolating. Epilepsy was a big part of my life and I often felt misunderstood and unable to connect with others who could relate. This sparked my volunteering in the epilepsy community to help find other people who could relate to my experiences. I began organizing teams to participate in the annual National Walk for Epilepsy. It was a great way to build community and meet others who understood my struggle. This involvement and community ultimately inspired me to pursue a graduate degree in public health.

While I was finishing my studies, I began volunteering with the Epilepsy Foundation, where I eventually found my professional home. Colleagues at the Foundation encouraged me to see an epileptologist after trying over 10 different medications and still not having control of my seizures. Connecting with an epileptologist finally gave my family answers we had been searching for over the years. While my seizures still aren't controlled, they are less frequent, and my quality of life is the best it has ever been.

I wish I would have known to see an epileptologist sooner, and have made it my life's work to educate others about opportunities to enhance their care. Some opportunities include identifying barriers to taking medication, learning how to best document seizures, and talking about SUDEP to better understand it.

From having my first seizure as a college student in small-town Ohio, to working in the White House, and now advocating through my work in a national organization, I continue to share my story to inspire others. I use my platform and experiences living with epilepsy to help others. It took me years to connect with others living with epilepsy, so I frequently mentor others, so they don't have the same experience I did. While I certainly didn't choose my diagnosis, I am thankful it helped me find my calling.