

Push Please Don't Me Around

By Estelle Pete, PLS and
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Briana Walker is a young, 28-year-old, energetic woman who lives in Southern California. Briana leads a very active life. She participates in sky-diving, wake boarding, triathlons, 5K runs, surfing, and hip-hop dancing. She has also modeled as a cover girl for Mobility Management Magazine and has tried out for the Lakers Girls. Oh, she is also a legal secretary!

What's the big deal? She sounds like a typical Southern California girl. The big deal is that Briana participated in all these activities while being paralyzed from the waist down. The big deal is that Briana is carving a path for other wheelchair-bound individuals to follow. The big deal is that Briana does not let being in a wheelchair prevent her from experiencing the thrills of life.

On a beautiful summer day more than four years ago, Briana was driving to meet a special friend at a church function. She was on her way to help this friend, but Briana never made it. Her car took a spin and hit the guardrail. Next, she was lying in the hospital and about to learn that she had suffered a spinal cord injury which would leave her paralyzed.

Briana remembers "Guy" as the first person at the scene. Guy called her by name and attempted to comfort her. It worked, according to Briana, and she felt total peace with his presence. However, when Briana later inquired about Guy, no one on the rescue team knew who he was. Briana felt he was her guardian angel sent to watch over her.

None of us plan for an accident to happen to us. These things are out of our control. However, what is within our control is what we choose to do with our situation. We can use our situation as a crutch throughout our life or we can do as Briana does. She takes what has been handed to her—this paralyzing injury—as a way to accomplish more.

After suffering such a terrible injury, most people lose their sense of humor, but not Briana. Briana jokes that her name should be changed to "Wheeler" rather than "Walker." Yet, when you talk with her, you realize she's above that joke. In fact, she hopes many people remember her name. She wants to be remembered for making people feel better about themselves, but she also wants to inspire them to "never give up."

She is a dancer, an athlete, a legal secretary, and—the last thing you notice—she is wheelchair-bound. But that's not what identifies her. You realize she's an intelligent woman who works in a law firm. And, just like you and me, she deals with a job, the stresses of everyday life, and freeway traffic. Like the rest of us, Briana worries about not having more than 24 hours in a day to complete all her tasks. However, she just happens to be sitting in a wheelchair.

Briana has competed in two triathlons as well as several 5K runs. She also performs wheelchair hip-hop dancing. She was the first female featured on the cover of Mobility Management Magazine. In early 2006, Briana tried out to be one of

the Lakers Girls. She didn't make the team, but was asked to return to do a half-time show. She has been on a Salt Lake City radio talk show and was in the background of a recent local television commercial.

Ask Briana how she perceives herself, and she will say she's a work-in-progress. With this attitude, Briana believes she is helping others as well as herself. Briana does not want others to see her any differently than she sees herself. She says "being disabled is only in your mind."

Briana cites several facts about paralysis. Studies show there are over 250,000 spinal cord injuries in the United States today; 20 percent of them are women. Most injuries occur between the ages of 17 and 24 in both genders. For men, injuries occur due to sports; for women, the injuries occur from automobile accidents. For spinal cord injuries, a high percentage of deaths occur due to kidney failure or problems stemming from injuries to internal organs. The most difficult thing about being in a wheelchair is that Briana is more susceptible to the illnesses which come with paralysis. This generally involves kidney-related problems.

Taking you back to that beautiful Southern California summer day, August 11, 2002, Briana was in an automobile accident which left her paralyzed from the waist down. When she was released from the hospital, Briana's family became overly protective. They wanted to do everything for her. However, Briana preferred to do things for herself. Even if it took an

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hour, Briana would inch along to get her own glass of water. Now, Briana's family does not offer her any special treatment. Instead, they allow her to help herself. Interestingly, the accident brought her family closer together, and they talk freely about emotions and readily say "I'm sorry."

Briana came to Jones Day in November 2001, after working as a sales clerk at Nordstrom and a car salesperson in Phoenix, Arizona. She began as a receptionist, a position she held for three and a half years, before becoming a legal secretary.

One thing Briana enjoys as a legal secretary is providing support and making someone else's job easier. She enjoys having people dependent on her to carry out tasks and to get the job done for them. Briana is accustomed to people assuming that she is the one dependent on them due to her circumstances—i.e., being in a wheelchair.

Before the accident, Briana's goal was to be a police officer. Now, her goal has changed. She is actively involved in overseeing a non-profit organization called the Welcome Home Foundation. The foundation was established to help

experience to others who are facing similar situations and sharing what it means to be disabled. Briana oversees the support team for every county in Southern California.

Briana set her story to paper. Her book, *Dance Anyway*, was self-published and tells her story of the accident, her healing, and her physical challenges. Her next book, *Does This Wheelchair Make My Butt Look Big?* is nearly complete, and Briana plans to distribute it to people going through rehabilitation.

Curiously, Briana does not announce her speaking engagements to co-workers because she feels it would be self-promotion if she did. In fact, she has a difficult time talking about her social activities. Ironically, she is not afraid to speak to teenagers and adults about the problems faced by people confined to wheelchairs or with spinal cord injuries. And she's not afraid to answer any questions.

For the second year in a row, Briana spoke on student leadership at the California Association of Directors of Activities conference at the Disneyland Hotel before 2,500 students. In early 2007, Briana will be a guest speaker at an elementary/junior high school for disabled students in Garden Grove, California. These are just a few examples of Briana's community activities.

Briana is modest in what she has accomplished. She believes she gets her time and energy because of her age. She feels that what she does after work



Briana enjoys a tandem skydive.

When Briana returned to her job, she noted that her co-workers treated her differently than before. The situation opened up a softer side of the personnel. In turn, she feels more open and more compassion toward her co-workers.

wheelchair-bound individuals adjust to their new life at home. When Briana was released from the hospital, no such organization existed to help her adapt to the challenges of being at home in a wheelchair. She is now taking her

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hours will help to prepare her for her own future. She is eager to leave the office and to experience as much of life as possible. In addition to her job as a legal secretary, Briana is the spokesperson for Colours In Motion—a United States company which manufactures sportier, lightweight wheelchairs which weigh approximately 17 pounds. Recently, Colours In Motion gave Briana a 24-carat gold-plated wheelchair. Briana says Colours In Motion is changing the face of disability. The lightweight wheelchair enables Briana to load or unload it into her car quickly, and thus allows her to be more independent. Over the summer, Colours In Motion flew Briana to Europe to promote its products. She realized during this trip that the United States is the one country with laws in place to empower people with disabilities to travel from place to place. Here, ramps are available, restrooms have stalls big enough to accommodate wheelchairs, and handicap parking spaces are designated close to entrances. Europe is not equipped to support people in wheelchairs. The restrooms are not on the ground floor, and there is only stairway access available. Wheelchairs don't fit through restroom doorways and, because European cities are older, many of the roads and sidewalks are made of cobblestone, making wheelchair travel more difficult. In Europe many people came up to her to examine her sleek wheelchair because wheelchairs used in Europe are the older, heavier models.

Briana has also been asked questions by Japanese citizens because, in Japan, wheelchair individuals are rarely seen. They are looked upon as unproductive citizens and are kept from public view. With access to the Internet, however, more wheelchair-bound Japanese are discovering that they can be independent and lead productive lives, like their

American counterparts.

Put simply, Briana lights the path for all of us on how to live our lives to the fullest.

If you are interested in having Briana Walker speak at your chapter, state or regional meeting, contact your local regional director for more information. Or, to learn more about Briana, go to her Web Site, www.BrianaWalker.com. You will be inspired by Briana, but more important, you will come away with a better appreciation for all the little blessings in your own life. Run to your

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Briana poses with a custom wheelchair.

family members and hug them. Dance with your friends. But, most important, love who you are and enjoy the thrills of your own life.

Briana Walker will be the Closing Keynote Speaker at the NALS 56th Annual Education Conference & National Forum in St. Louis, MO. More information and registration information on pages 18 and 21 of this issue.