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Come Walk in My Shoes

Car accident survivor Briana Walker addressed sixth-graders at Niguel Hills Middle School today.

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In 2002, Briana Walker fainted at the wheel while driving to church on a Sunday morning. She was in the hospital for eight days before transferring to the rehabilitation hospital. She was in and out of consciousness for three days as they kept her in a drug induced sleep most of the time.

She later learned that she was paralyzed from the waist down, but she has never given up her fight to be a whole person. In fact, she not only founded a hip-hop dance troupe, published a book about her life, but has also become a successful spokeswoman, athlete and model.

Walker, 32, an ambassador for the [Life Rolls On Foundation \(http://www.liferollson.org/site/pp.asp?c=egLLKTNJE&b=932743\)](http://www.liferollson.org/site/pp.asp?c=egLLKTNJE&b=932743), shared her inspiration today at [Niguel Hills Middle School \(http://lagunaniguel.patch.com/listings/niguel-hills-middle-school\)](http://lagunaniguel.patch.com/listings/niguel-hills-middle-school) during a special assembly. This is the third year for the event and Walker's second time addressing the students at the school.

"I plan to share with them my personal story of tragedy to triumph along with one of my personal mantras, and that is: 'Life turns out best for those who make the best of the way life turns out.' I try and instill in my audience that adversity will come no matter what, but the choice is yours on how to handle it. When you handle adversity with grace, the trial and burden doesn't seem so heavy and you are able to see more light and less tunnel."

March is also [Disability Awareness Month \(http://inallianceinc.com/2011/03/08/march-is-national-developmental-disability-awareness-month/\)](http://inallianceinc.com/2011/03/08/march-is-national-developmental-disability-awareness-month/), and the event is being sponsored by the school's PTSA. Walker's presentation, while promoting tolerance and empathy toward the disabled, will show the students what can be accomplished even in the most adverse situations. Walker also speaks at churches, nonprofit organizations and business functions.

Drive and Determination

The Santa Ana native said she gets her drive, determination and inspiration from a higher power.

"I know that anything is possible with God in my corner. I am an instrument in his hands, and I rely on the inspiration that I receive through personal prayer and spiritual promptings," she said. "The most important part of all of this is that I act on those promptings. I made a choice to overcome this challenge, and I continually act on doing so every day. Some days are easier than others, but I can lay my head down at night and feel I have experienced victory for that day.

"I take one day at a time and line up line my abilities and expand along with my understanding of what it is that I can do to make this new life circumstance meaningful to me and others."

She said he has learned to overcome her disability and live life to its fullest with the help of humor.

"Laughing a lot was the best medicine and continues to be. My last name is Walker, and I don't think it gets funnier than that in a situation like this—unless, I suppose, your last name is Runner."

Walker said she tries to speak to about 10 schools per year, hoping to make an impact.

“Look around. Times are tough for most people. If there is something that I can share with someone that helps them breathe a little easier or helps them change their perspective on the trials they are facing, then I feel I have done some good in the world that day. Speaking is very therapeutic for me as well,” she said.

For example, Walker said, there are times when she is asked to speak about a certain topic and it seems “just the right medicine” for her at that time.

“I still experience adversity, and that will always be. That's life! But I am always learning and re-learning and adapting and growing. I have plenty of ‘aha’ moments when I speak. I don't know who or what I am channeling during those moments while I am speaking, but I come away from the experience learning something new. We should all continue to educate ourselves in many forms.”

Whenever people tell her that they can't do something because they are in a wheelchair, “all I can say to that is: ‘Watch me!’ There are things that I enjoyed doing before I was injured, and I wanted to still do them. I just found a way to make it work. There were also some things that I always wanted to do but never got the opportunity before I got hurt, such as skydiving. Well, I dusted off that list and got to work.”

It's not that Walker hasn't any fears; she just doesn't let anything stop her from actually “going for it.”

“Getting injured gave me a reality check that I am not invincible,” she said. “I am human, and I can break. Ironically, the first bone I ever broke was my back, and I broke that sucker right in half. My parents called me ‘an accident waiting to happen’ when I was young because I always seemed to be getting hurt from being involved in so many sports, activities and hobbies.”

She sprained her ankle on a golf course, too, during a match in high school and recalls her dad saying, “Only my daughter”

“I heard those words a lot from him growing up,” she said. “Bizarre things, exciting things, cool things, ironic things, and bad things always seemed to come clumped together that make you [ask], ‘What are the odds?’ Well, as my dad says, ‘only my daughter.’ He is the one that has made me feel like I can do anything I set my mind to since the time I was young.”

Keep Moving

Though she has moved on, she hasn't forgotten the accident.

“I feel like I relive my accident every time I speak to an audience or while visiting a newly injured patient in the hospital. I like that it stays raw, and I can keep those emotions on my sleeve in order to relate to those I am speaking with in the hospital,” she said. “That was one of the best moments for me while I was in the hospital: my first visit with someone that was paralyzed.

“I notice at times when I am rolling on the street and I happen to pass someone in a wheelchair that I can tell is paralyzed ... we nod at each other as if to say, ‘I get it,’” she continued. “I am a firm believer in ‘cease to be idle.’ If I am not continually progressing and taking an active role in my life, then I feel as if I am moving backward even if I am sitting still. I am never going to get these days back again once they have passed, so why would I let life pass me by?”

She said there is too much to experience in life, people to meet and love to share.

“My memories are the only things I am taking with me when this life of mine is over, so I better stock up on some good ones and a lot of them, because I love to tell stories,” she said. “An eternity of telling the same stories over and over just doesn't seem like a good time to me.”

After the accident, she was in the hospital for eight days and the rehabilitation center for two months. She was discharged right before her 24th birthday.

“Twenty-three didn't turn out how I expected it, so I planned on a ‘do-over’ on my 24th birthday,” she recalled. “My mom took my wish to heart and made sure there were only 23 candles on my cake with the words ‘Happy 23rd Again.’ ”

Walker said she isn't sure if she will ever walk again, but “I don't spend much time thinking about it, to be honest. I leave that up to the scientists and the professionals. I don't want to sit at home and wait for some miracle cure, holding on to hope. I want to live my life even if it means I do it from a shorter height.”

Teaching by Example

Walker added that it is important to teach by example and share with others the way she lives her life because people seemed to be inspired by that. For example, she pulled into the parking lot at school last semester and parked in a handicap-zone spot. The school security was sitting in his car thinking he was going to bust her for parking there and give her a ticket once she walked away.

“Well, to his surprise, when I opened the door, I began to take my wheelchair out and did so rather quickly,” she said. “He then noticed that I had my head up high, and I was smiling as I rolled to my class. I found out about this story because it turns out this security guard's mother had just been injured and was now paralyzed. She was feeling really down while in the hospital and didn't know what to do with her life under these circumstances.”

The security guard visited his mother as soon as his shift was over and told her of his observation that day, Walker later learned.

These days, in between hip-hop and speaking, Walker is a full-time student working toward a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice, along with launching a speaking business called [Briana Walker International](http://www.brianawalker.com/) (<http://www.brianawalker.com/>). She is an ambassador for [Life Rolls On](http://www.liferollson.org/) (<http://www.liferollson.org/>), [Ralph's Riders](http://www.ralphsriders.org/) (<http://www.ralphsriders.org/>), [Abilities Expo](http://www.abilitiesexpo.com/) (<http://www.abilitiesexpo.com/>), [PossAbilities](http://www.teampossibilities.org/) (<http://www.teampossibilities.org/>), along with managing the sponsored athletes for [Colours Wheelchairs](http://www.colourswheelchair.com/) (<http://www.colourswheelchair.com/>), and serving as the regional coordinator of peer coaching for [the Christopher Reeve Foundation](http://www.christopherreeve.org/) (<http://www.christopherreeve.org/>).

“My life is headed in the right direction. Along the way, I pick up the slack in areas that I need to pay more attention to, but I keep moving forward and checking items off my to-do list along the way,” she said. “I am happy, I have peace, I am comfortable in my own skin and, most importantly, I know who I am and what I stand for (no pun intended).”



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