

Plans Disrupted, Plans Recast

Transforming the future



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I have always been a planner. As a student accepted into Duke University, I was accustomed to the comforts that come from planning. In high school I laid meticulous plans for my future and looked forward to pursuing an exciting, if somewhat predictable, litany of experiences. Of course I left some room for improvisation; I always recognized that my natural curiosity could lead me in new directions. But the general attitude with which I would approach my time at Duke was largely set in stone.

Or so I thought, until my life changed radically and permanently in July of 2011. Just a few weeks before I was to head to Durham for my freshman year, I sustained a severe spinal cord injury when I broke my neck during a diving accident. It is the rare event that cleanly cuts the past from the present, present from future, but this surely qualifies. The plans I had so carefully made for my future disappeared in a second—leaving only a few tapered strands fluttering in the wind, searching for connections in the shadow of chaos that defined my new life with quadriplegia.

The story of my hospitalization and rehabilitation begins with these strands, that is to say, it begins with chaos. I spent some truly terrifying and confusing times at some truly incredible places. Right after my injury, I was hospitalized at Methodist in Indianapolis before transferring to the Shepherd Center in Atlanta for rehabilitation. There I stayed, undergoing intensive treatment every day all the way through July 2012, a full year spent in the hospital setting.

This year was very different from the one I had envisioned spending at Duke. It was a time of almost impenetrable darkness for me. Just as I was on the cusp of leaving home, ready to actualize my plans for the future, the world as I knew it—the world that rewarded prudent planning with expected results—was over. I was forced to accept the fact



that I might never walk again—a fact made even more bitter because I was occupying a room in a hospital instead of in Randolph dorm on East Campus. I struggled immensely with gaining the label of disability in an emphatically able-bodied world.

And yet there were many lights along the way. My family and I benefited from a truly incredible support system, consisting of family friends and old teachers and community members I had never met. Among the most brilliant supporters were countless members of the Duke community. I received a steady stream of communication and encouragement from Dukies of all sorts: deans, coaches, the young man who was supposed to be my roommate, and President Brodhead. The administration informed me that they would still honor the scholarship I had received, whenever I was able to accept it. The bookstore donated T-shirts to be worn by volunteers staffing a fundraising event to finance my hospitalization. All this, from a school at which I had not yet even taken one class.

From day one, I was resolved to attend Duke, no matter what my physical condition. Posters of the chapel, letters from faculty, and basketball jerseys lined the walls of my hospital room. Attending Duke became my mantra, one of the only things helping me get through long days of rehab. Gloomy days were brightened mostly by thoughts of returning to the classroom once again. In essence, Duke became my most effective therapy.

And so throughout my rehabilitation I began to form new plans. Different plans, but plans all the same. With enormous help from the student disability access office, my parents and I thought through how my return to Duke would look. Going to college in a wheelchair poses significant challenges. There are new routes to classes to be figured out, new methods of note taking and test taking, different living arrangements, and more.

Finally, one year and several hundred mindsets later, I started my collegiate career in the fall semester of 2012. It was even better than I imagined. While attending Duke had been my primary motivating force throughout the past year, it had become for me a distant abstraction; I had forgotten what it was about school that was so great to begin with. The moment I returned to the classroom, however, I remembered. I have always loved learning, but I found a renewed appreciation for school. The classroom setting allowed me to excel on a level playing field with everyone else. I could use the richness of my experiences, however tragic, to relate to others on a deeper level.

At some point I recognized that I'm threading an entirely different life, and my plans have necessarily changed to reflect that reality. I got involved with the administration to serve as ambassador to students on medical leave and founded a nonprofit organization to help those who have suffered spinal-cord injuries return to college (I'm an exception in that regard). But these are just short-term plans.

My long-range plans are pretty unformed—something I would never have imagined two years ago. My break from the traditional academic treadmill has afforded me a new perspective and allowed me to be comfortable with uncertainty. Every facet of my life has been colored by my diving injury. But perhaps the most transformative consequence is my willingness to pursue plan B.

Ruckelshaus, a rising sophomore from Indianapolis, is spending part of the summer studying at the University of Oxford as one component of his A.B. Duke Scholarship.