

Sessione Teenager

TESTIMONIANZE

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I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of eight. It was the most frightening and shocking moment of my life, hearing that I have this disease. I knew nothing aside from the fact that countless people have died from it. In the beginning, living with diabetes was an immensely difficult challenge. It affected nearly every aspect of my life. I grudgingly put up with everything it entailed, from the finger sticks to the multiple daily injections to the strict meal plan I had to follow. I put up with this because I had to.

Eight years, or half my lifetime later, diabetes doesn't present nearly the same difficulties it once did. Sure, it can still be hard to deal with at times, but I take it all in stride. The bad days seem like nothing when I think about all the opportunities I have been given since I was diagnosed. I like to think of my diabetes as a blessing because of all the great things it has brought into my life. None of it would have come about, though, if not for the hard work of people like Lucas' parents, Marissa's dad, and my mom, along with many others who rarely get recognition. They have all dedicated so much time and effort, basically their lives, towards creating something positive out of diabetes. I really admire them for that. Seeing what they do has led me to consider a future working in some way with diabetes. I've actually become very interested in following in my mom's footsteps and planning diabetes conferences. Whatever I end up doing in my life, I just hope that I have as much passion and dedication as these people.

Four years ago, back in 2002, a program called IDYA was created. IDYA stands for International Diabetes Youth Ambassadors. I was one of four founding members along with Marissa. Lucas was one of the earliest members. Originally, the goal of the program was to promote diabetes advocacy and awareness. We began working on a number of projects to raise money for research and to spread knowledge about diabetes. As time passed, however, we began to ask the question, "What if we shift our focus towards turning IDYA into an outreach program for teens with diabetes?" We realized that this would fit the group better. Thus, IDYA became an extensive support group for kids and teens all over the world, a way to communicate with other people with diabetes when there was nobody else to talk to.

I have met some of my best friends through IDYA and the CWD conferences.

Whenever we meet up at conferences, it feels like 'home.' No matter how long it's been since we last saw each other, when we get together we continue where we left off and always have great times together. I talk to these friends on the phone or over the internet, or sometimes both, every day, and I have much stronger connections with them than I do with my friends in Manchester.

In essence, having diabetes and being involved in the IDYA program has changed my concept of what defines a community. Most people place geographic boundaries on their communities, limiting the number of people they come in contact with. I belong to several communities: the village of Manchester, the high school which I attend, the ice hockey team that I play for. The most important and meaningful community that I belong to, however, has no geographic boundaries or restrictions placed on it. It is the CWD community. This diabetes community includes people from everywhere imaginable, all over the world. It's a wonderful feeling knowing that I share a common bond with all these people in the form of diabetes. By being part of this global community, I have the world open to me, always presenting new opportunities to do wonderful things, such as the invitation to come and speak here in Genoa.

Over the past 4 years, IDYA has taken me to places that I could never have imagined before. In November of 2002, when the program was still just beginning, I traveled to Denmark with Marissa, my sister Carolyn, and the fourth founding member, Clare Rosenfeld. We received an invitation from Maersk, now Unomedical, to visit their headquarters and main factory in Copenhagen. It was an incredible experience. It was so cool seeing the infusion sets that I use being produced by the thousands right in front of my eyes! We toured the country's leading diabetes clinic to learn about how diabetes is managed in Denmark. The most exciting part of our trip, though, was meeting and spending time with two Danish teens with diabetes. We talked face to face about what it's like living with diabetes in countries so different. We became good friends with them, and we still stay in touch to this day. In fact, the very next summer, the teens came to visit us in Michigan. They spent a week at our house and visited our clinic at the University of Michigan, so we were able to reciprocate the learning experience!

Aside from traveling to other countries to meet other teens with diabetes, IDYA has created programs to help those who are not fortunate enough to be able to afford their own diabetes supplies. In conjunction with Lucas and his family in Colombia, we organized a project to collect extra diabetes supplies from other families in the United States who have extra. We packed up meters and blood glucose strips, glucose tabs and Extend Bars, and sent them to the Escobars, who then distributed them at the largest free clinic in Cali. Another program, called Supplies for Children with Diabetes, involved collecting emergency supplies for families in the US who suddenly found themselves without the means to purchase them. Throughout the course of two years, we gathered over \$50,000 worth of diabetes supplies for those in need. It's truly a great feeling knowing that we contributed so much to children who needed help so badly.

As I grow older, I find myself wondering how I can give back to the diabetes community, which has given me so much over the last 8 years. I've realized that one of the biggest things I can do is be there to help support CWD and IDYA. When I've passed through the teen and young adult programs at CWD conferences, I can give back by leading or helping out in sessions for any age group and volunteering my time to help the conferences run smoothly. I can also do a lot outside of the conferences. Communicating with other people helps greatly in many aspects of our lives. I can give back simply by reaching out to those who need help through a difficult time, or those who are new to the diabetes community and in need of a friendly face and hello to welcome them. I may still be young, but doing these things

now starts to put the same ideas into the heads of the younger kids. In as little as 5 years, these kids will be the leaders of our groups, and in turn they will set an example for the next generation, “completing the circle,” in a sense.

In closing, I want to thank you once again for the invitation to visit your country and to speak at this conference. I love Italy, and it is truly an honor to be here representing IDYA and the United States. I hope that we continue to share the same community for many years to come.

Mille grazie.