

Life after limb: Amputees share successes in meaningful meeting



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As an amputee, other people just don't get it.

I appreciate the attempts to understand, but trying to zip your coat with one hand when you have two is not the same as *having* to zip your coat with one hand because it's the only hand you have.

Caroline Cunningham gets it.

The 16-year-old sophomore at Western Hills High School was born without a right hand and continues to live life like a normal teenager — as she should.

She's getting her driver's license, is a member of the dance team and can put stud earrings in by herself.

She has 12 years of experience on me when it comes to being one-handed, and it shows. I'm baffled when it comes to stud earrings.

Up until Feb. 8, 2009, I wasn't an amputee. But that morning, as I was driving from Grand Rapids, Mich., to Bloomington, Ind., on Interstate 65, the weight of my eyelids won the battle of trying to stay awake.

My eyes popped open when I heard the noise of my 1999 Chevrolet Blazer bumping along the rumble strip on the left-hand shoulder near the Rensselaer, Ind., exit. I panicked, overcorrected and could feel the Blazer tipping.

When it stopped rolling, I was upside down, trapped inside screaming for help. My left hand was crushed. The doctor later told me there was no chance of saving it given the condition it was in.

In my four years of living with one hand, I've learned and adjusted as necessary. I can button shirts, zip coats and pants, type just as quickly as I could before and put my contacts in without struggling.

I adapted because I had to, but I'm far from having it all figured out.

I've spent countless hours with various occupational therapists since my accident, and they've all

been supportive but there was one problem — they all had two hands.

When you're not always tying shoes with one hand, your advice on how to do it won't be the best, which is why meeting Caroline recently was a great opportunity.

In my short time as a reporter, I've been lucky enough to meet a wide variety of people, but meeting or writing about amputees is a little more meaningful.

I met Caroline's mom, Chris, a few weeks ago for a story about the hair salon where she works, Cuttin' Heads Up. She later contacted me, suggesting a story about Caroline dancing for kids at an after school program. It's the second time I've been able to write about an amputee.

Two years ago in Washington D.C., I covered the Medal of Honor event at the White House. The recipient was an Army Ranger whose hand was blown off as he threw a grenade away from two fellow soldiers in Afghanistan.

There are more than a million amputees nationwide, but I don't frequently run into someone who is missing the same limb as me.

It's an unusual trait to have in common — only having one hand — and my curiosity was running wild when I talked to Caroline.

“What's the hardest dance move?”

“Back handsprings.”

She's only done it by herself once.

“Is there anything you can't do?”

“The baby freeze.”

It's a dance move that involves balancing on your hands and kicking your feet to the side.

But she quickly added, “I'll figure it out one day.”

She sounded like me, I thought, but more impressive. I certainly could never do a backhand spring with two hands, or a cartwheel (which I've seen her do) or learn to play guitar (which is her next goal).

What Caroline does on a daily basis is inspiring, but she's not doing it for attention.

Chatting with a fellow amputee isn't about complaining to each other about our struggles. It's a practical discussion with someone who knows exactly how you manage to put your hair in a ponytail or get dressed in the morning.

It's about using the words “myoelectric prosthetic” and not getting a perplexed look in response.

It's talking about the woman from the last season of "The Bachelor" who was born with one hand, and how we don't understand why she couldn't balance on roller skates.

It's hearing how Caroline holds the clasp behind her ear and pokes the stud through with clever finger work.

It's about knowing what a pain health insurance companies can be when it comes to prosthetics, and then the troubles of adjusting to all-of-a-sudden using two hands again.

It's conversations that just wouldn't work with someone who has two hands. Amputees, as odd as it is, have a connection to each other.

Caroline's been lucky enough to be involved with an amputee organization since she was a kid — the International Child Amputee Network. I, on the other hand, didn't even realize groups like that existed.

I've always persevered on my own, almost too proud to need assistance. The reality is, talking to someone who can actually understand your situation is extremely beneficial, even if only for a few minutes.

Caroline inspired me to not give up on something because I don't know how to do it. She inspired me to challenge myself more.

And, now, thanks to her, I have a strategy for wearing stud earrings again.