

Before I tell GCY swimmer Katie Fritz's story, I would like to take a moment to recognize this great sport and the coaches, parents, officials, and swimmers involved with it. There are dozens of kids or more, in our state alone, that each year face some type of life challenge, often through no fault of their own. Swimming has proven to be a great vehicle and positive distraction that helps our athletes navigate through those tough times. I'd like to thank the TYDE Swim Team for continuing to passionately recognize at least one swimmer each year to tell his/her story of determination, and I'm very proud to tell you Katie's story tonight.

Katie's battle has been with scoliosis....I knew a lot about her scoliosis and surgery, and saw her remarkable recovery. I got to experience her passion, workout intensity, dedication, and perseverance in practice each day, and her dedication to performance standards and goals at her meets. But, I did not know a lot about the details and how everything came to be, so I asked her mom, to give me a summary of her story which I'd like to read now:

"Back in 2015 Katie came home from a water park and complained about her back hurting. I took a look at it and as she bent over I noticed her right side was lifted. I told Katie that her back did not look right. I asked Billy (her father) and my mom to look at it too and they had the same thoughts. We made an appointment with her pediatric doctor who examined her back and diagnosed her with scoliosis. They referred Katie to a spine and scoliosis dr. who of course had to x-ray her back in order to determine the degree of curvature. I can remember them telling me she had a 23 degree curve in her spine. This was all new to me; they explained that they would continue to monitor Katie every 6 months to see if it changed. We went back in 6 months, they performed another x-ray and sure enough it changed by 6 degrees, almost 30 degree curve. The scoliosis doctor referred Katie to a pediatric orthopedic doctor who fitted her for a very hard-shell brace that was made exactly for Katie. She wore that brace EVERY night for a year in hopes that it would slow the scoliosis growth. Still, her back continued to change and at this point she was at a 40 degree curvature. I knew then what we were up against. I knew she would have to have surgery, the question was when and how was this going to affect her? Six months later we had another follow up appointment and Katie was now at 45 degrees. Katie was in the 8th grade, she was a middle

school soccer player, and a full time swimmer who could not wait to get to High School so she could compete. After long conversations with her doctor, school administrators, and looking at timing... we decided to go ahead with the surgery before she got to high school.

Katie was scheduled for a spinal fusion in May of 2017. This surgery was scheduled to last 5 hours which consisted of an incision all the way down her back in order to fuse 2 rods and 16 screws in her back to straighten her spine. She stayed in the hospital for 5 days. They immediately began physical therapy while she was in intensive care which was very painful to watch. PT came 2x a day. They had her sit up on the side of the bed, the next day they had her stand and at that point she passed out. Later they came back and she stood and took a few steps. It was hard to watch but her determination was incredible. The physical therapist told me she would not be able to leave the hospital until she walked the halls and went up a flight of stairs. I was thinking we are going to be here a long time but Katie proved me wrong. By day 4 she had walked the hall and climbed a flight of stairs. We were all in complete AMAZEMENT.

Trust me; there were days where she was down, days where she asked me to keep visitors away. In her words, 'Mom I felt like I have been hit by a bus and I'm trying to walk again" but she NEVER CRIED!!

Day 5 we were going home and that is when depression sat in... She could not do much. Getting out of the bed was exhausting. She could not get comfortable, she was irritated and although she wanted to cry, I reminded her she had not cried yet and she could not start now. She could not even get out of bed by herself, she had to re-learn how to do nearly everything.

Katie stayed out of swimming for 4 months. She slowly returned and eventually started competing again. Competition was hard, she was frustrated, VERY FRUSTRATED, but she kept being persistence and never once stopped.

It's been over a year now. Katie still has some catching up to do but she has made remarkable strides. She swam for her high school team. She made regionals and placed 1st in the 50 free at HS regionals and 3rd overall at HS States. At Regionals she told me, "mom, I'm taking first" and sure enough she did. We all cried.

Katie decided to run track at school to help with her swim endurance. She ran track with a mile pace at 6:36. She is unbelievable. She still has some work to do but she is so determined to keep improving. I have never met anyone like her. Not because she is my child but because to me she is a champion. She is a champion not by numbers but by her determination to do her best. She loves swimming; she has great coaches and great teammates. All of that has played an important part of Katie recovering."

Katie you are truly a fantastic teammate, an inspiration to me and others, and a pleasure to coach; congratulations to this year's Andy Craver Award winner, GCY's Katie Fritz!