

Hello, good evening athletes, parents, and coaches. My name is Kesslyn Ward and I'm a swimmer from the Regional YMCA of Western CT and today I share with you my story. I started swimming when I was eight years old. Over the years, my perspective on the sport has shifted greatly. It has given me some of the biggest heartbreaks and greatest joys in my life. I started swimming competitively at the Wilton YMCA and later at RYWC; there I met many lifelong friends who have helped me through my hardest times.

In 8th grade, my whole world flipped upside down. My dad was diagnosed with colon cancer and, at the time, I was too young to fully understand the gravity of the situation. Throughout this past year, my life became nothing short of an emotional roller coaster. As a junior in high school, my commitment, integrity, and perseverance for the sport began to dwindle. For a while, swimming became my outlet. Staring at the black line at the bottom of the pool was the only stability that I had. My dad turned gravely ill in November of my Junior year. The doctors told us he had 6-8 weeks left. He passed away on December 29th, 2017. I will never forget what I learned from my experiences with my dad, and how it has changed me into a better person and swimmer today.

I struggled so much after I lost my dad. Swimming was no longer my best friend; it became my enemy. I was left with only my thoughts, staring at the black line, trapped in what seemed like a chlorinated dungeon. Along with my mental health, my love for the

sport started to fade. Pulling myself out of the pool became a grueling task and waking up for 5 AM practices was nearly impossible. That's when I was forced to take a step back and ask myself, why do I swim? For months I contemplated this question and I am here to tell you what I have learned.

Throughout the challenging days I faced, I have learned that no matter how severe the circumstances are, your swim family will always be there for you. No matter what life throws your way, you have to get back up and chase that black line. Swimming used to make me feel trapped and isolated until I began to swim for something greater than myself. I swim for my team and all the people who have been there for me. I swim for my dad, I swim for all the people I've lost, and I swim for everyone who couldn't make it here today.

So tonight, I want to ask everyone to hold hands with the person standing next to you and take a moment of silence. Tonight we honor the ones we lost, we honor those less fortunate than we are and we swim for them. We swim for something greater than ourselves.

(15 sec)

Thank you.

