

# Preparing to climb to new heights with my sister [column]

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I sat on a crowded pool deck the day I realized how bad it was.

Hours before, my sister Krystyna woke me up during the night with another headache. During winter 2007, she had moved home to Scranton, Lackawanna County, from Virginia on disability leave when she started having headaches and falling.

Undiagnosed, doctors sent her home while they tried to figure out what was happening. She was 26 and it was only a few years after she graduated from Temple University where she was on the women's varsity crew team.

The headaches were getting worse and more frequent. That December, doctors told our parents they needed to get her to neurological specialists. So our parents put her in the car and drove her nearly 250 miles to Georgetown University Hospital.

I was in my senior year of high school. I was the captain of my swim team, and it was my team's home swim meet. My parents sent me to my meet.

I remember the feeling of being disconnected when I sat on the pool deck surrounded by the other swimmers. I remember a lot of adults asking me what was going on and I repeatedly having to say I don't know.

I also remember the usual sounds of a swim meet.

"Swimmers take your mark," a beep, a splash — followed by cheers.

I wanted to go home.

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I am the youngest of six children, four boys and two girls. We grew up in a yellow ranch house with a wrap-around white porch that one of my brothers built on a corner lot in North Scranton, next door to my grandparents.

Most of my siblings had moved out by my senior year, but that winter, my sister was back on the bottom bunk of the “girls room” we shared growing up. When I was little, she would lay on the bottom bunk and push the top bunk up to make me laugh. And when I was scared, she would reach her hand up and hold my hand until I fell asleep.

Krystyna is eight years older than me. I was her personal Barbie doll, which came along with at least one burn on my ear from a curling iron. When she left for college in 2000, I cried.

In 2007, she was back in the same light green room we had chosen as a paint color as kids.

My mom told me later that she held Krystyna in the back seat the entire drive to Georgetown Hospital and prayed she would not die.

Krystyna lost her ability to walk and her speech. She could not grip items like utensils and had to be put on a feeding tube at one point.

She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disease that affects the body’s central nervous system. People can experience different symptoms that range from numbness and speech difficulties to mobility problems. There is no cure.

Krystyna was put on medication and went to rehab in Scranton. She regained all of the functions she had lost. In total, she spent about three months out of work.

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Then, well, life went on.

I went to Temple University and she moved back to Virginia. She picked up yoga and started running more. We have done two marathons together — one in Philadelphia and one in Scranton.

In college, I used to organize fundraisers for MS organizations. I realized her story was not that unique. I met other people who have been affected by MS — some who have it, some who have loved ones who have symptoms like mobility problems that put them in wheelchairs, and I met some people who have lost loved ones from multiple sclerosis complications.

Krystyna is making the most of her right now. She and her husband, Jim, often travel to other states, frequently go to live events and go on hikes around the country. Honestly, more activities than I can really keep track of.

The last few years have come with setbacks. She has had to switch medications a few times. In 2021, Krystyna had to change medications and lost some of her mobility and speech. Separated by hundreds of miles, for the first time we got in the habit of talking every night on my drives home.

She went to rehab again and got moving again. And life went on again.

This past December, she sent me a text: Would I train to hike Mount Katahdin in Maine? She said if I got in shape for it, she and her husband would handle the rest.

Krystyna and Jim have both climbed Mount Katahdin. It is the highest mountain in the state of Maine at 5,269 feet and sits at the northern end of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. There are a few ways to get to the top of the mountain but our plan is to take the Hunt Trail, a part of the Appalachian Trail.

And that is the journey I am about to invite all of you to read. This will be a three-part series of the journey and (hopefully)

completion of climbing Mount Katahdin with my sister and her husband at the end of August.

I said yes to the hike because I do not know how many chances I will get to do this with my sister. But then again, do any of us?

This is a chance to make the most out of my right now with her.