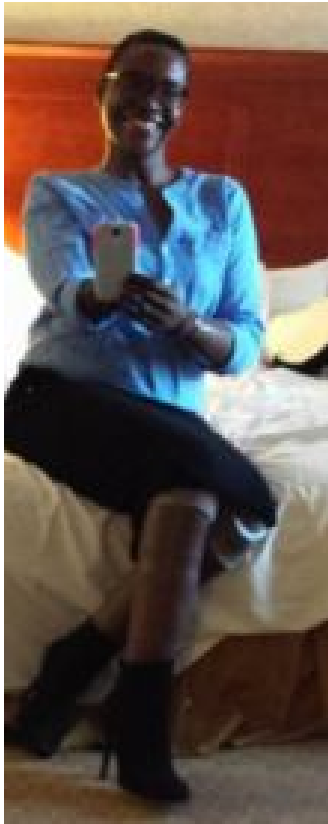


Surviving Meningitis: Rayna's Story

Rayna DuBose



They always say that your freshman year is the year that you find and discover yourself. For Easter break that year, I decided that I would go home for the first time that weekend. My basketball teammate, Fran, came home with me. We took the Greyhound bus from Blacksburg to Northern Virginia where my parents picked us up. This was a six hour bus ride stopping and picking other students up along the way. I drank three or four big jugs of Gatorade the whole trip and never used the restroom once. I thought that doing that was the coolest thing ever, but it was actually the first sign of dehydration.

After a great weekend at home, Fran and I returned back to the Blacksburg for lifting and workouts. This day we were juggling bean bags. We were all standing in a circle when suddenly I started feeling hot and dizzy. I looked at Fran and she told me to get some water. So I took a few sips out the fountain then returned back to my spot to finish juggling. Maybe two or three minutes later I knew something was not right. By that time, my workout shirt was drenched, I was burning up but at the same time had uncontrollable shivers and goose bumps.

I guess you can say I was a bit of a drama queen freshman year, especially if I did not want to do something. I knew that I got sick easily. Every flu season, I usually got sick at least two or three times. So I assumed that's what was going on. Why think any differently? After we were done working out, I slowly made my way back up to the locker room to lay down on the couch. Normally, after workouts the freshman girls and I would walk over to the dining hall and get food before study hall, but that day, all I wanted to do was nap. I laid on the couch for about two hours and was feeling worse and worse by the minute. I was freezing cold. I was shivering, shaking, and sweating uncontrollably all at the same time. I asked my roommate to run me a hot shower and took a forty-five minute shower just trying to get warm.

It did no good—I came out feeling even worse than I did before I got in. I could not make it to dinner, so I told the girls to bring me back something small and wake me when it was time for study hall. I was starving but could not eat a thing. At eight o'clock, I got up to go upstairs to study hall. I walked up two sets of stairs, six or seven steps each, which took damn near all of my energy. Then I made my way down what seemed to be the longest hallway ever. Using the wall to support me the

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whole time, I finally made it to the office where study hall was for women's basketball. When I reached the office, I put my black backpack in the chair and tried to walk around the desk. Instead, I collapsed to the floor.

I was stretched out on the floor like someone had just knocked me out. I remember hearing my academic adviser, Katie, come around saying "All right, let's get going," like she did every night. When she came into my office, I told her something was not right, and she said she was going to get a couple football players to pick me up and put me in the chair. I guess she thought that was going to make me jump up. Fading in and out, I remember them coming in and standing next to me to pick me up, but that was it. I vaguely remember lying on the floor drooling and confused. I passed out and was briefly awakened when I was taken out on a stretcher. Then I passed out again.

I woke up later that night in the hospital with an IV in my arm—the University of Maryland men's basketball game was on TV, and my coach, Bonnie, was sitting in a chair next to my bed. They diagnosed me as dehydrated, and the normal procedure was to pump me with a couple bags of fluid and send me on my way with Tylenol. I was eventually released and Coach took me back to my dorm room. I felt good when I left the hospital—just exhausted and starving. Fran and my roommate had been waiting for me to get back, but I just wanted to sleep. I lay down in my bed, on the bottom bunk, and Fran and my roommate made sure I was okay before going to get food. I asked them to grab me a chicken sandwich—I still had not eaten since workouts. They were gone about thirty minutes, but it seemed like hours to me. By the time they got back I had lost my appetite and was fading in and out because I was exhausted. They stayed with me until I fell asleep.

The next morning we had mandatory team pictures. I remember this day so clearly. My alarm clock went off about seven o'clock, and my roommate came tumbling down off her top bunk. Thinking I would be feeling better the next day after a good night's rest—boy, was I in for a treat. I woke up screaming her name. "HELP! SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT—I FEEL TERRIBLE! CALL BONNIE!" I could not describe the feeling, but I felt like I was dying. She called Bonnie and told her that I felt even worse than I did yesterday. I did not have the strength to sit up in my bed let alone walk across the parking lot to the gym. Fran had come down to the room because the three of us did everything together including walking to the gym. They got me out of bed, dressed me in my sweatpants and sweatshirt, did my hair, put my sneakers on and carried me to the locker room.

Even though I was the biggest drama queen on the team, when I walked through the locker room doors on my roommate's back, the girls knew I was not right. I could



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see it on their faces. I sat down in front of my locker, on my stool hunched over and feeling uncomfortable and in pain. Some of the other girls helped me get dressed in my uniform for pictures.

My roommate carried me out the locker room and up the tunnel. Thank goodness for me being over six feet tall because she was who I stood next to for pictures. I remember the coaches yelling that whoever didn't smile was going to run after, so I made sure I put on my best smile that day. I remember standing in the back thinking, "This is taking forever," and feeling weaker each minute. The longer we stood there, the weaker I got and the more coach yelled. To this day, my parents have this team currently picture hanging on the wall, and every time I walk past and look at it, I see a ghost in me. After the team pictures, my friends helped me back into the locker room where again I changed into my sweats and sat back down on that leather couch in the locker room.

I looked to the sky and thought, "Man, this cold is kicking my ass." My mind had been made up days before about clas- there was no way I could go. Coach Karen came over and asked me "What time is class, Ray?" I told her I was not going to make it and asked if she could take me to the doctor. I remember trying to get up off the couch, but I was so weak I couldn't do it, so I asked her to help me. I don't think she was too thrilled about helping me since she thought this was another one of my drama-filled moments. I finally made it outside to her car, and she drove me across the parking lot to our on-campus clinic.

I remember seeing a nurse with a wheelchair come out to my side of the car. She helped me into the chair, and then as she started to push me through the double doors, I blacked out again, not waking up until 3 weeks later.

When I woke up from a coma, life for me was over. Before I got meningitis, all I had known was basketball. My first memory after waking was my plastic surgeon, nurses, coach, my parents, and brother standing around my bed. I had a plan, an agenda, that day. It was finals; we had practice.

The doctor said, "Hello Rayna, I am sorry to tell you that you have bacterial meningitis." That day I also learned that I would lose both my hands and both my legs. I ended up being in a coma for three weeks, blood circulation stopped flowing through my body causing me to get gangrene in my hands and legs, resulting in the amputations. My body had completely shut down.



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That day I awoke, I knew this was going to be hard. Being an athlete, I still had that fire that burned within me, but this was a battle I was not prepared for. Out of the ninety-seven days spent in the hospital recovering, I denied everything and anything that had to do with recovery. No therapy, no therapists, no nurses, no visitors—I did not even want anyone but my family and coaches in my room. I wanted to be alone. Knowing that was not an option, one day my parents gave me the look they used to give me when it was time to get on the court, the one that told me to get out there and kick some butt! The one thing my parents have never done to me is lie. When I saw that look, I was instantly ready for this challenge. That fire was ignited.

Going through this disease has really taught me a lot about myself. If I could go back twelve years today and change a thing about my freshman year in college, I would not change a thing. This is a life lesson I appreciate. I am a huge advocate for preventing all vaccine-preventable diseases, but especially meningitis. I want to make sure everyone knows that there are vaccines available that can prevent this devastating disease. When I am not traveling and speaking, I am substitute teaching and assistant coaching boys' varsity basketball. I take every chance I get to inform informing kids about meningitis and the vaccine that can protect them. I've learned that anything can happen to anyone at any given point in life so we have to make sure we protect ourselves whenever possible.

Read more at www.VoicesForVaccines.org/blog

