

# Multiple Sclerosis

## Channing Barker

**Multiple sclerosis is a typically progressive disease for which no cure has yet been found. Although we have treatments to manage the disease course, they are only partially effective, which means that some people's MS will worsen in spite of everything they and their doctors do to try and prevent it.**

**— National Multiple Sclerosis Society**

To meet Channing Barker is like having sunlight pour down on a cloudy day. Her sparkling blue eyes and her beaming smile exude warmth, confidence, and an energy that just draws people to her. It only takes a moment to realize she is unique among students interning in our nation's capital. Then again, despite outward appearances, no one would guess that Channing lives with multiple sclerosis, a complex autoimmune disease affecting the central nervous system that has challenged her daily since the age of sixteen.

In 2006, Channing was a busy high school junior in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Drama team, student council, ballet, and cheerleading consumed every moment she wasn't in class. In January, while leading cheers at a basketball game, a strange tingling shot up her leg, a pain she first ignored. Then, as she sprung for a jump, the sensation grew, leaving her no feeling in her leg. She crashed to the floor in shock and embarrassment.

Recognizing that her daughter was not prone to such mishaps, Patti Barker got Channing to her pediatrician immediately. "We had a caring, attentive pediatrician who was not afraid to make an immediate referral to a pediatric neurologist, who was smart, resourceful, communicative, and not so egotistical to say, 'this is out of my league' when MS became an optional diagnosis," explains Patti. Nevertheless, it took three trips to the hospital and two spinal taps before Channing was referred to Dr. Lauren Krupp at the National Pediatric MS Center at Stony Brook University Hospital and Medical Center in New York, which led to a confirmed diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

"People thought I was crazy, but I was actually thrilled to have an answer," Channing recalls. That Pollyanna-like optimism quickly turned to sorrow when she was incapable of dancing in her spring ballet recital and later, she suffered a fall at her junior prom. By spring, she was put on steroids to manage a flare-up and was walking with a cane. Channing's senior year was an emotional rollercoaster. "I just lost it," she says as she thinks back to that painful time. "The disease had taken over my body, but I hadn't really faced it. I realized that my life was going to be different." A relapse forced her to undergo rounds of steroid treatment that impacted her sleep, caused mood swings, and irritated her skin. "For two months, I was flat on my back."

Although Channing was put on a highly effective self-injectable drug, she has faced relapses. In April 2011, she was once again put on complete bed rest and a steroid regimen.

Despite these debilitating challenges, Channing remains optimistic. "My story is really simple compared to other pediatric MS patients. I received a definitive diagnosis in a matter of months while others have suffered much more dire consequences in the search of an accurate diagnosis."

Channing is now an advocate for the MS community and pediatric patients in particular. She sees the need for physician education so more doctors recognize MS as an adolescent disease. She wants a diagnostic test that can deliver a quick and conclusive determination for patients and their doctors. She wants treatments that will address primary progressive MS and reverse the symptoms of MS so that people don't have to resign themselves to scooters and wheelchairs to remain mobile.

With Channing's resolve and tenacity, there is no doubt she will help make all of this a reality for the 2.5 million people affected by MS worldwide. Channing will make her mark on this world.