

Lymphedema is not me

A young girl's journey to self-esteem with lymphedema

Everyone is different and that's okay

By Isa-Bella Leclair

Although I have had lymphedema since I was born, I've only known about it since I was seven years old. The doctors have always told me that it was a secondary effect of Parkes Weber Syndrome, the genetic disease I have that affects the veins and arteries in my right leg.

I have just turned 20 years old and have learned so much about lymphedema in the past two years. My right leg has always been bigger than my left leg, a lot bigger. As a child I noticed that I was different but I never considered it a bad thing. My family was truly amazing and they never made me feel left out. We were always travelling from one hospital to another and they always made me see how I was the lucky one. How my handicap, although more visible than other diseases, is far less serious than most of them. I could still walk, play, travel, go to school, and live my life mostly outside of hospital walls, a pleasure a lot of sick kids could not enjoy.

And so I lived my life, went to school and made friends. All of the new people I met that noticed my leg were curious about it but as they came to know me, they soon forgot about it, or in other words didn't care about it. I'm from a small town in northern New Brunswick so it didn't take long for everyone to know about my leg and they all had the same



reaction: it did not matter to them at all. As long as they knew that I was okay with it, they were okay with it. And so I realized, as soon as

I entered kindergarten, that curiosity is normal. People will stare because my leg is different. To accept that was the first step in establishing the self-esteem I've been building since I was born. To be kind, respectful and grateful outshines all of the physical characteristics that may define you as different.

When I entered high school I had a close group of friends including my twin sister who, to me, is my absolute best friend and my inspiration every day. She is the same age as me, has the same parents, and was raised in the same house with the same privileges. So I strived to be like her. I had my limits,



physically, but apart from my leg we were one and the same. It was in high school that I noticed that the people my age were starting to care a lot more about how they looked. The girls

started wearing makeup and the boys started going to the gym and some of my friends' confidence plummeted. They were seeing women in movies and magazines and were thinking that they themselves were not pretty enough,



not skinny enough, never enough. I never saw that because I accepted at a very young age that everyone is different and that is what makes them beautiful, flaws are only flaws if YOU think they are.

Lymphedema is what makes my leg swell up. Because of lymphedema I have had to wear compression garments since I was seven years old. Because of lymphedema I have to sleep with my leg elevated. Because of lymphedema I get a lot of infections that put me in the hospital for weeks. But it is NOT because of lymphedema that sometimes

I wish I could wear skinny jeans. It is NOT because of lymphedema that I might sometimes second-guess myself when I am on a crowded beach in a bikini. And it is NOT



because of lymphedema that I am seen to a lot of my friends as brave or inspirational. That is because of myself. Lymphedema is not me. Lymphedema is only a side effect of living. I control what I think; I control how I perceive my value and how I see my body. And you do too. The most important thing I have achieved in life is to understand that all our thoughts come from our mind and we are the only one who can control them. Not the people who judge us, the ones who tell us we're not pretty enough or the ones who have a problem with us because we're different. It is you who controls them and the instant you decide to let those thoughts affect you, you have failed yourself.

Lymphedema is not me, and lymphedema is not you either. **LP**



Isa-Bella Leclair is a 20-year-old Acadian from Northern New Brunswick, studying full time at the University of Ottawa in the hopes of becoming a Civil Engineer. Wrongly diagnosed at birth with Klippel-Trenaunay Syndrome, she was correctly diagnosed with Parkes Weber Syndrome along with primary lymphedema at the age of seven. She enjoys spending time with friends and family, reading a good book, learning about anything and everything, exploring and eating good healthy vegan food.