

FINDING HER VOICE AGAIN

By: Michaela Devins

Devins, 31, was a vocal performance and music education major at Ithaca College who had dreamed of singing professionally for her entire life. A botched dive in 2010, the summer of her junior year of undergrad, resulted in a C4-5 spinal cord injury that damaged her vocal cords and robbed her of the breathing control she needed to sing. Devastated by this loss of identity, she spiraled into a deep depression.

“More than the ability to walk or go to the bathroom by myself, singing was what I wanted back. I felt like the Michaela that was had completely shattered. I wondered, what do I do with these pieces? Where do I go from here?” says Devins.

Her family did its best to help her, but no one knew how, including the mental health professional at rehab, who did “less than nothing” for her. She found herself hiding the depth of her emotional and psychological suffering.

She didn’t seek therapy again for years. She cried when people weren’t around and endured many sleepless nights, numbing herself with TV. At one point, she told her best friend she wanted to die. “She held space for me. She didn’t judge me or freak out, and that was my first taste of what therapy could be like, even though she was not a trained mental health professional. Just being able to say it out loud and not have someone tell me that I was wrong, or bad, or evil for feeling that way was healing,” says Devins.

Devins’ mom kept pushing her forward, too, encouraging her to keep rehabbing and pursue an undergraduate degree in music education. But music was still too painful for Devins to reembrace.

She eventually obtained a master’s degree in literacy education but didn’t get any job interviews after graduating. Between that and the stress of figuring out how to live as a quadriplegic, she started to have anxiety attacks. Now she’s married and living independently for the first time. Her husband suggested counseling.

“My God, it was transformative,” she says. “Just having an objective third party listen to you, reflecting things back to you and helping you unravel the things that get tangled in your brain, helped in ways I never anticipated. I gained so much insight about myself, especially my grief and even being able to name it that.”

Devins was substitute teaching and doing literacy tutoring for kids at the time, and she realized that many kids in her class couldn’t learn because they weren’t getting proper mental health support.

“I felt there was a real need there, and I had this feeling like, oh my God, therapy works,” she says.

She got dual certified in mental health and school counseling. In her first placement at an outpatient agency, she worked with clients aged 6 to 60. She wasn’t sure at first how they would receive her disability.

“With kids, you have that initial conversation, and then it’s a non-issue,” says Devins. “With adults, sometimes there is that awkwardness, but I’ve found my disability to be a real asset in the mental health

arena. Folks come in because they've been through, or are going through, some difficult things. And I have found that when people first lay eyes on me, there's this shared understanding of, 'Oh, you've been through some things too. You get it.'"

Devins currently works at Advocates Community Counseling in Marlborough, Massachusetts. She couldn't be happier.

"I just feel that having a disability gives me that little extra relatability that I wouldn't otherwise get without one. It kind of makes all my struggle to get here worth it because it informs the way I help people through their own challenges."