

RESILIENCE

A Lifestyle Magazine for People With Disabilities Who Want to Live More Fully

KEEPIN' IT REAL

*Champion Swimmer
Struggles Against the
Current Out of the Water*



A Cure for Diabetes?

**Army Vet Shares PERSONAL
ANECDOTES of RESILIENCE**

THROUGH THE LENS OF RESILIENCE
Overcoming Vision Challenges

Benefits of Embracing Optimism

Racial, Ethnic Groups and Barriers to
Obtaining Obesity Medications

[RESILIENCEMAG.COM](https://resiliencemag.com)

SUBSCRIBE FOR FREE TODAY

EDITOR'S NOTE: For some readers, downloading the PDF of this publication may offer a better reading experience.

COVER IMAGE: Ashton Smith. Image courtesy of Ashton Smith

RESILIENCE

Publisher

EurekaVision LLC

Copyright 2025 EurekaVision All rights reserved

Editor

Rick Bowers

Design/Photography/Illustration

Dean Kane

Contributing Writers

Becca Wake

Zach Kiser

Advertising Sales/Marketing

EurekaVision LLC

Letters to the Editor

Rick Bowers

rick@eurekavision1.com

Contact

Rick Bowers

rick@eurekavision1.com

Follow and Share

Instagram: resiliencemagfordisabilities

Twitter: RESILIENCEmag1

www.RESILIENCEmag.com

SUBSCRIBE FOR FREE TODAY

CONTENTS

Click on the following links to go to articles in this issue:

[Message From the Publisher and Editor](#)

[Keepin' It Real](#)

[Champion Swimmer Struggles Against the Current Out of the Water](#)

[Racial, Ethnic Groups and Barriers to Obtaining Obesity Medications](#)

[A Cure for Diabetes?](#)

[Army Vet Shares Personal Anecdotes of Resilience](#)

[Through the Lens of Resilience: Overcoming Vision Challenges](#)

[Benefits of Embracing Optimism](#)

[RESILIENCE Is Evolving - Again](#)

[SUBSCRIBE FOR FREE TODAY](#)

Message From the Publisher and Editor

- Welcome to *RESILIENCE*.
-
- In this issue, we talk about something that isn't often talked about in a disability magazine.
-
- Most of the time, articles about people with disabilities are about them succeeding and overcoming obstacles.
-
- Such stories are great and help motivate people, but the reality for many people with disabilities is not always so rosy.
-
- There isn't a clear line between suffering and struggling and finally succeeding. Instead, there are up and down periods - periods of some success followed by periods of having to struggle again. And rather than simply focusing on those who seem to always be winning, we should also recognize those who face periods of struggle too.

Those who struggle to get to class in a wheelchair.

Those who want to work but can't find a job.

Those who struggle with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

Those who have dreams that aren't fulfilled.

The problem is that such stories can be depressing. We have our own struggles. Why would we want to read about other people's problems, right?

Well, even people who are struggling often have worthwhile things to share.

Ashton Smith and Tonya Oxendine are great examples.

Smith is a former medal-winning champion swimmer for the Special Olympics, but today she is struggling to get her life to where she wants it.

Oxendine is a military veteran who has struggled with PTSD.

Do their struggles mean their stories have no value?

Certainly not.

■ They do.

■ Just seeing others fighting to win is important.

■ Listening to their thoughts and feelings is important.

■ We hope you'll read more about these two women here. You might even identify with their struggles more than you identify with the stories of people who always seem to be winning in everything they do.

.....
- *Rick Bowers*

SUBSCRIBE FOR FREE TODAY

BECAUSE INFORMATION CHANGES LIVES



EUREKA VISION

We Help Organizations and Businesses Connect With and Win Their Target Audiences

Got a great product or service but not enough people know about it, recognize its value, or seem to want it?

Are you not getting the results you want from your efforts to connect with and win your target audience?

~~It May Be~~ If So, It's Time to Bring in the Professionals

The Right Plan
+ The Right Words
= The Right Outcome



We offer the following services to help you achieve your goals:

Communications Consulting
Copywriting/Content Writing
Editing/Proofreading
Case Studies/White Papers
Annual Reports
Magazines/Blogs/Newsletters

Custom Publications
Website Analysis, Content & Design
Grant Writing
Ghostwriting
Social Media
Press Releases

Contact us today for a FREE one-hour, no-pressure, no-obligation consultation to discuss your communications needs. Don't wait another moment!

www.EurekaVision1.com
info@EurekaVision1.com
865-684-7438

Your Dreams Are Our Business

Articles about people with disabilities often focus on uplifting narratives about overcoming barriers and achieving success. While inspiring, these stories often overlook the many persistent challenges people with disabilities actually face in their daily lives.

The following article deals with a young woman facing such obstacles.

KEEPIN' IT REAL

Champion Swimmer Struggles Against the Current in Effort to Achieve Her Goals

By Becca Wake / Photos Courtesy of Ashton Smith



In a swimming competition, swimmers don't really compete against other swimmers as much as they compete against the resistance of the water to their body moving through it. The struggle is really a human being battling the resistance to his or her efforts to move forward to success.

Ashton Smith, a former champion swimmer who has won multiple medals, knows this too well. Smith has endured much resistance in her young life—various hardships that might have easily broken others. And while she still sometimes flashes a bright smile, the world still often seems to be blocking her path to achieving her goals.

Smith's struggles started early in life, and she's been dealing with them for nearly four decades now.

The Early Years

Being born with an eye anomaly that left her legally blind and suffering from a speech impediment started her out on a challenging path.

In addition, her father also left the family when she was very young, and she was mostly raised by her grandmother since her mother worked. Although she had that essential support, it was still not an ideal family situation.

And outside the home, the struggles continued.



Because of her disabilities, she was often picked on by other kids.

“I got picked on to the point that even when I was in school, I told my parents I wanted to die,” she says. “I never got picked [for sports] when I was a kid. I would always get picked on, not picked up. It was horrible.”

“To say it caused inner trauma would be putting it mild,” she wrote in her 2021 book *Swimming Upstream to Realize the DREAM*.

Discovering a Way to Cope—At Least for a While

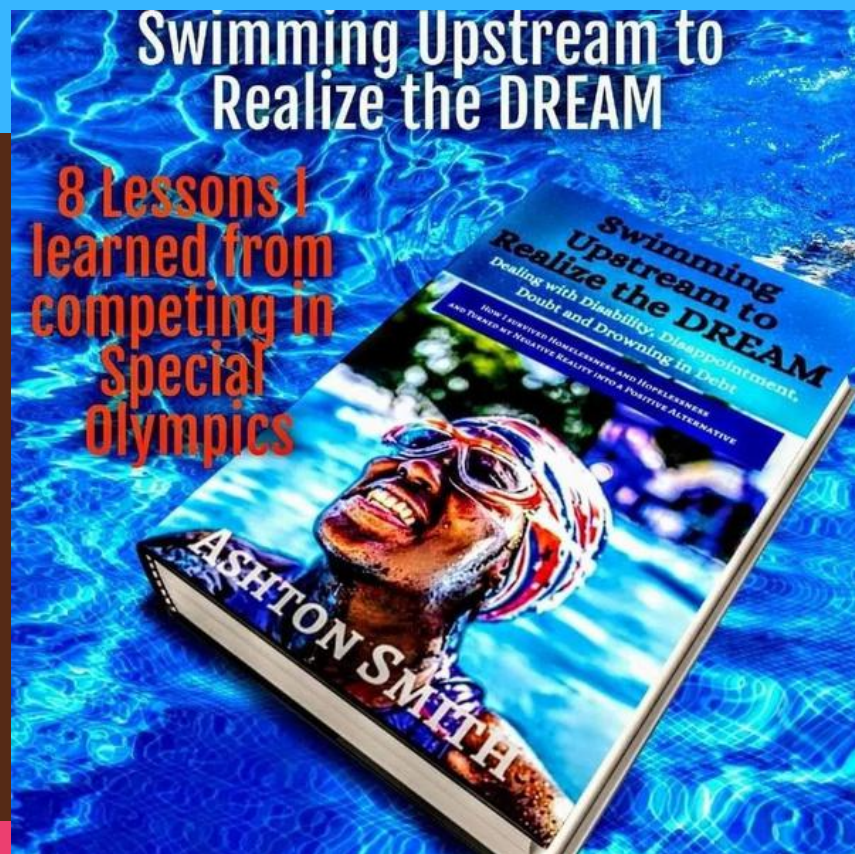
So, how did this young woman cope while the good things of life always seemed to be out of her reach?

It was swimming, which she learned through the YMCA at the age of 9 when she was growing up in Texas, that made a huge impact in her life and gave her hope for her future. The sport became her main focus and helped her cope, she says.

“I found myself at the YMCA in Waxahachie almost daily,” she wrote. “Once I discovered the water, I was naturally drawn to it.”

As she competed against swimmers without disabilities in high school from 2001-2004 and won several medals, her self-confidence grew, and she began to dream that she might be able to make a career in the sport.

Indeed, one of the benefits of swimming was that, unlike in other parts of her life, her disability didn’t matter to others; if she was good at it, that was all others cared about.



The Special Olympics and the Struggles of Daily Life

After high school, Smith began training hard to participate in the Special Olympics, and over the years, she would go on to win several medals in competitions in the U.S. and abroad.

In 2018, she won multiple medals, including gold in the 100-meter butterfly high-performance division. Then, in 2019, at the Special Olympics World Games, she competed in four events and earned a silver medal in the 200-meter individual medley.

But participating in the sport was difficult, she says, largely because there was no money in it, and she wasn't rich.

With little money to support herself, she even became homeless for a while and slept on friends' couches and visited homeless shelters.

“I was dealing with homelessness while I was in [the Special Olympics],” she says. “I was going from place to place to place and not knowing how long I would be at that place.”

Growing Disappointment With the Special Olympics

She ultimately became disappointed with the Special Olympics because the program didn't pay athletes or provide financial support for them.

Unlike Olympians, she explains, the athletes also didn't get endorsements. Moreover, she needed to spend several hours a day training for competition, which destroyed her ability to work a full-time job.

While others made money from athletes' likenesses and other materials related to their participation, she says it didn't trickle down to her and the other athletes



While the leadership of the organization lived well, she says, the athletes didn't benefit financially.

One day she was on ESPN, she says, and the next day she was panhandling on the street to survive.

"I was on ... ESPN television, the biggest sports network on earth, but I'm poor," she said on Conversations with Calvin: WE the SpecIEs in 2021. "That's bad!"

"I need money, not medals," she asserted on the program. "A lot of my medals I've sold or threw in the trash because it's not paying my bills. A lot of that stuff with Special Olympics I sold to eat and pay my bills."

People shouldn't have to suffer, she told In the Front Row in 2023. "You shouldn't have to go without food to eat, clothes to wear, a roof over your head. I've suffered all of those things. ... Just because you live in a certain ZIP Code does not mean that that should be the plight of your life. Where you live should not dictate the rest of your life."

She also says she wasn't always treated well by everyone who worked at the Special Olympics and that she experienced racism.

As she rose in the sport, she says that there were fewer and fewer people who looked like her (i.e., black people) participating. In fact, she was often the lone black person around.

That's what her life has been, she said in her 2021 Conversations with Calvin interview. "Trying to overcome a disability ... overcoming various issues in my life that I've dealt with including racism, hatred and bigotry."



A Better Life and Pursuing Dreams

Now in her 30s, she says she lives in government housing in a nice area, which she attributes to the federal government and a credit program that helped her raise her credit score from the low 300s to 680 and rising.

Yet she notes that she still has to work at “backbreaking,” low-income jobs, such as moving heavy furniture, to survive.

She’s currently working in a grocery store, which she says is definitely not her dream job.

“No. No. No,” she says, “I want to be a public speaker.”

While she says she hasn’t had much fun in her own life, she still believes her purpose is motivational speaking to help others.

Unfortunately, so far, she’s only been able to get booked at events where she speaks for free or sometimes even has to pay to speak.

But, she says, she now tells people and companies not to ask her to speak for free when it doesn’t also benefit her.

Do not ask,” she says. “No more! ... I want to get paid. I don't want to work for free or swim for free. None of that.”

“What I want in my life is opportunity and someone that says, ‘I’m going to book you,’” she said on In the Front Row in 2023. “The biggest thing I need now is an opportunity.”



“Public speaking is going to allow her to make a living, she says.

“That does not mean be a public speaker but yet I’m still on food stamps. ... Making a living means that you are independent of all government assistance. That’s when you know that you are making a living and not a job. See the difference? A job will leave you on food stamps.”

Smith says that a single speech can pay several thousand dollars and that would help her get on her feet.

“A lot of people are told to be content with being on welfare or being disabled,” she told TALRadio English in 2024. “I want people to overcome [and get] off of welfare ... because you shouldn’t have to live on welfare ... on as little as \$700 a month.”

Smith is largely disappointed in the Special Olympics because she feels she gave the program many years of her life without any benefit to her. Now, she believe it’s time to get fair payment for the work she does.

Advice From Her Book

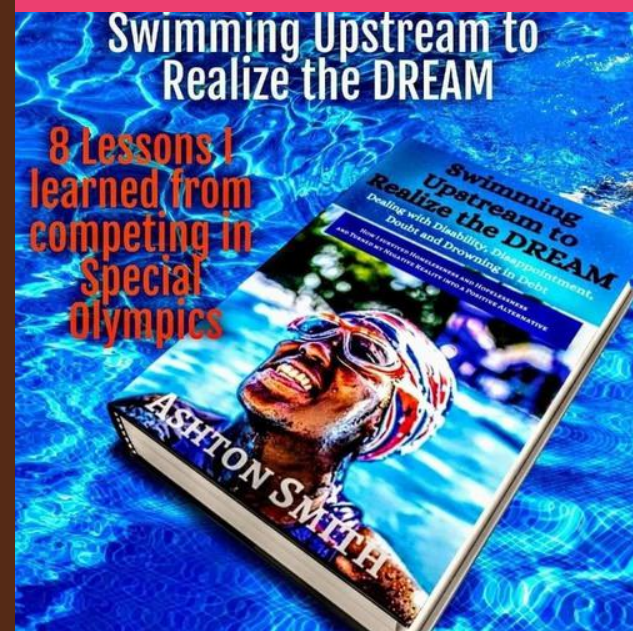
Smith has learned a lot over the years, and her book, *Swimming Upstream to Realize the DREAM*, discusses the following eight concepts to help others:

- Understand your Uniqueness
- Prioritize your Purpose
- Strategize your Success
- Transform your Trials
- Research your Resources
- Elaborate your Expertise
- Analyze your Aspirations
- Minimize your Mistakes



espnW @espnW · 2h
"You don't let society dictate what you can not do."

@SpecialOlympics athlete Ashton Smith will motivate you to make it through the week 🌟



She also gave the following advice to others in her 2024 TALRadio English interview:

“[Believe] in yourself, [be] around people who encourage you, and get people out of your life who [do] not. ... Find companies and people that are willing to make investments in you and not make you pay to have an investment.”

Still Striving to Reach Her Full Potential

Unfortunately, Smith says, “People call folks with disabilities walking liabilities, and I don't want to be a walking liability. I want an LLC. I want to have my own money. I'm sitting here living on welfare, and that's not OK.”

“All I ask,” Smith told an audience at a TAGTalks event in 2023 as she broke into tears, “is that people understand that the disabled want to work, and we want jobs too, and we want to be able to take care of ourselves.”

Smith has dreams for the future but needs help to make them come true.

For one, she would like to start a swim camp for underserved communities one day but needs funding for the program.

She also needs about \$4,000 to help her get her speaking business, Golden Ashton, off the ground.

But here's the problem. She's in a catch-22 that many people with disabilities who live on government assistance face.

If they want to start a business, they are unlikely to have the money to start it—often because people with disabilities are at a disadvantage in the workplace and because the government makes it difficult or impossible for them to save enough money to do so.

“I don't have four grand,” she says, “and I'll never be able to save up money [in my situation].”

So, while people with disabilities may have dreams just like anyone else, the world often stands in their way.

And, at times, it can be like swimming uphill with your hands and feet tied together.

An overwhelming proposition—even for a champion swimmer.

How Can You Help?

If you'd like to book Smith for a paid speaking engagement; sponsor her or help her raise the \$4,000 she needs to establish her speaking business; help her start her swimming camp; or purchase *Swimming Upstream to Realize the DREAM*, visit maddpop.com/ashtonsmith or contact her at ashton1049@gmail.com

You may also purchase *Swimming Upstream to Realize the DREAM* on Amazon.com or Audible.com

For more information about Smith's ongoing battle with Special Olympics, Google Ashton Smith's Special Olympics.

Join our community and movement for black
and brown girls and women with disabilities.

Showing up *unapologetically*
to reshape what
disability looks like

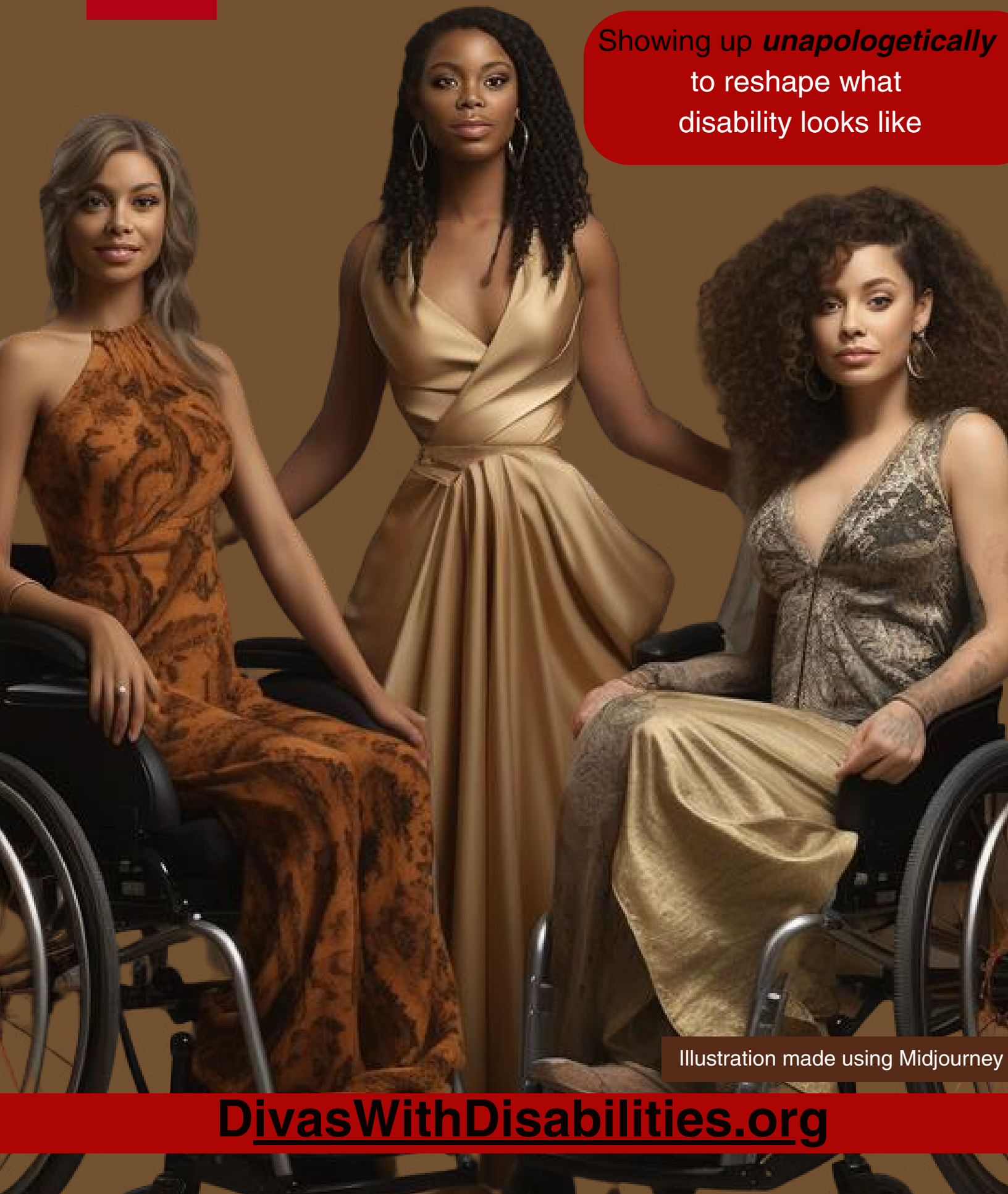


Illustration made using Midjourney

DivasWithDisabilities.org

We Are **DIVAS**

Dynamic
Illuminating
Victorious
Achieving
Sisters

[Click here or anywhere on the image below to watch a brief video about Divas With Disabilities](#)

We Are Divas  With Disabilities

THE DIVAS WITH DISABILITIES PROJECT



Illustration made using Midjourney

Visit Our New Divas With Disabilities Blog for Black and Brown Women Today

There, we post various articles, announcements and other information of interest to Divas.

Be sure to check back from time to time to see what's happening in Divas World.

[Click here to visit the blog now.](#)

Our first articles are:

[**Zazel O'Garra: Reclaiming the Spotlight Through Resilience and Dance**](#)

[**The Invisible Ones: Shedding Light on Non-Obvious Disabilities**](#)

[**The Day That Changed My Life**](#)

[**Representation and Belonging: Black and Brown Women with Disabilities in Media and Beyond**](#)


People From Some Racial and Ethnic Groups May Face Barriers to Obtaining Obesity Medications

Asians, non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics were significantly less likely than whites to use obesity-management medications to lower their weight compared with whites, new research suggests.

The differences could not be fully explained by income or education level, health insurance coverage or clinical need.

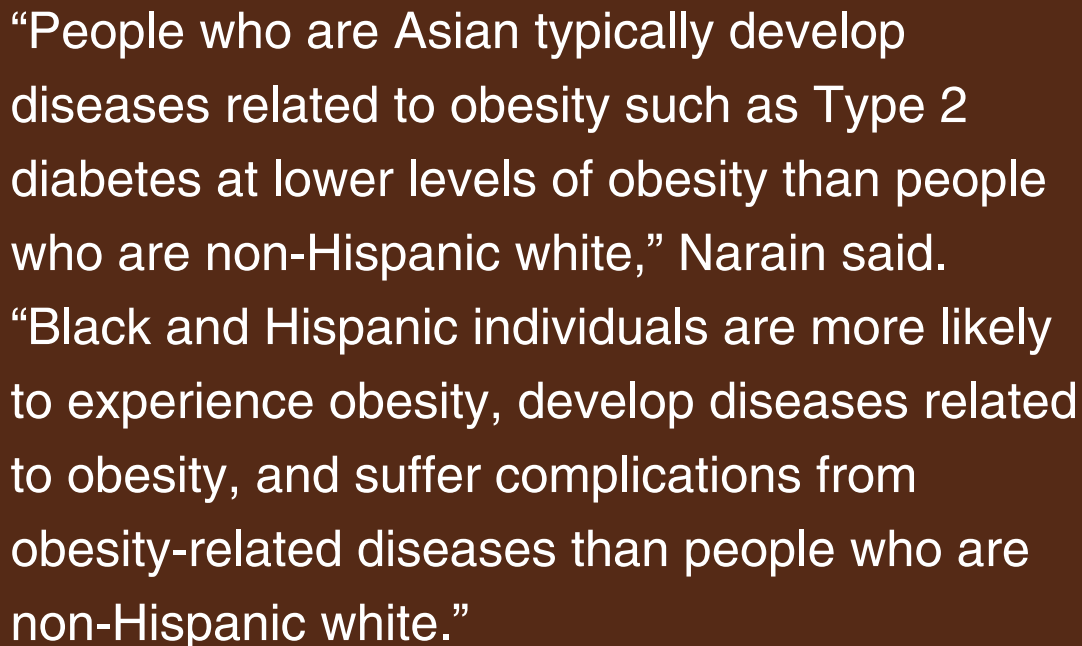


Image produced using Artbreeder




The study, published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, is one of the few to compare the use of obesity-management medications across racial and ethnic groups and the first to consider how socioeconomic status might contribute to these disparities, said Dr. Kimberly Narain, primary care physician, obesity medicine specialist and researcher in the division of general internal medicine and health services research at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. Narain co-authored the paper with Dr. Christopher Scannell, primary care physician and researcher at USC.

The findings suggest that more research is needed to explain these differences, Narain said.




“People who are Asian typically develop diseases related to obesity such as Type 2 diabetes at lower levels of obesity than people who are non-Hispanic white,” Narain said. “Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to experience obesity, develop diseases related to obesity, and suffer complications from obesity-related diseases than people who are non-Hispanic white.”



“Our findings suggest that people with obesity from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds may face barriers to obtaining medications to treat obesity,” she said.

The researchers used data from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey for the years 2011-2016, 2018 and 2020, controlling them for demographics, socioeconomic status, obesity class, diabetes status, number of chronic conditions, insurance status and geographic region. The study sample contained 91,100 adults who were eligible for obesity management drugs.

Of those, 68% were classified as obese and 32% were classified as overweight with at least one weight-related condition. Broken down by race and ethnicity, about 3% were Asian, 14% were black, just under 16% were Hispanic, and about 68% were white.



The researchers focused on all FDA-approved medications to treat obesity available during the time period of the study. They also conducted an analysis that considered potential off-label use of GLP-1 receptor agonists FDA-approved for the treatment of diabetes, which also may lead to weight loss.

They found that Asians were 64% less likely, blacks 49% less likely, and Hispanics 30% less likely than whites to use obesity-management medications, after taking level of obesity, number of clinical conditions, diabetes status, insurance type, demographics, socioeconomic status and census region into account.

While income, education, health insurance type and clinical need did not fully account for these disparities, the researchers suggest that lower education and either a lack of insurance, reliance on public health insurance, or inadequate health insurance coverage may at least partially explain the disparities among blacks and Hispanics, while lower Body Mass Index (BMI) may explain some of it among Asians. In addition, there may be cultural differences in the acceptance of larger body types and the acceptability of medications to treat obesity that may underlie some of these differences. Lastly, differences in how medical providers communicate with individuals across racial and ethnicity may be playing a role in these differences.

There are limitations to the findings. The researchers could not determine causality about relationships between race, ethnicity and use; they had to rely on BMI, which is a flawed measure among some groups, for eligibility for the medications; and the medications they considered did not include newer FDA-approved obesity medications.

But a full understanding of the factors that drive, or prevent, use of these medications among racially and ethnically diverse populations is crucial to ensuring that everyone has equal access to these medications, Narain said.

“It will be important to gather information from racially and ethnically diverse individuals regarding their perspectives on using medications to treat obesity,” she said. “We need more investigation into the role of other potential drivers of these differences that we didn’t consider in this study, such as health insurance benefit design.”

This article was adapted from information provided by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Health Sciences.

Researchers Move Closer to a Cure for Diabetes

New research confirms a novel route for human beta cell regeneration



Image produced using Midjourney

Diabetes researchers and bioinformaticians from the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai have developed a new understanding of how human beta cell regenerative drugs work. These drugs, developed at Mount Sinai, may hold promise for more than 500 million people with diabetes in the world.

The results of this study were recently published in *Cell Reports Medicine*.

Diabetes develops when cells in the pancreas known as beta cells become unable to produce insulin, a hormone that is essential to regulating blood sugar levels. While great progress has been made toward discovering a durable therapy, none are scalable therapeutic options for millions of diabetics across the globe.

For more than 15 years, researchers at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai have worked tirelessly to find a solution to cure diabetes by identifying a drug that could make human beta cells regenerate.

In 2015, Mount Sinai researchers discovered the first such drug, called harmine. Harmine is a member of a class of drugs called DYRK1A inhibitors.

In 2019 and 2020, the researchers reported that DYRK1A inhibitors can synergize with TGF-beta signaling as well as GLP-1 receptor agonist (GLP-1RA) drugs such as semaglutide (e.g., Ozempic) and exenatide (Byetta) to induce more robust levels of human beta cell regeneration.

Finally, in July 2024, they showed that harmine alone increases human beta cell mass by 300 percent, and if a GLP-1RA is added, by 700 percent.

A key question has been how harmine causes beta cells to regenerate. In the newest study, the research team reports that the new, regenerated beta cells may be coming from an unexpected source: a second pancreatic cell type called alpha cells. Since alpha cells are abundant in people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes, they may be able to serve as a source for new beta cells in both common types of diabetes.

“This is an exciting finding that shows harmine-family drugs may be able to induce lineage conversion in human pancreatic islets,” says Esra Karakose, PhD, assistant professor of medicine (Endocrinology, Diabetes and Bone Disease) at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and corresponding author of the study. “It may mean that people with all forms of diabetes have a large potential ‘reservoir’ for future beta cells, just waiting to be activated by drugs like harmine.”

“It has been remarkable and rewarding to watch this multi-group story unfold over the past 15 years,” added Andrew F. Stewart, MD, Irene and Dr. Arthur M. Fishberg professor of medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and director of the Mount Sinai Diabetes, Obesity, and Metabolism Institute. He and Peng Wang, PhD, professor of medicine (Endocrinology, Diabetes and Bone Disease) at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, conceived of and performed the initial high-throughput drug screen that led to the discovery of harmine, described in Nature Medicine in 2015.

“A simple pill, perhaps together with a GLP1RA like semaglutide, is affordable and scalable to the millions of people with diabetes,” said Dr. Stewart.

The Mount Sinai team is moving these studies to human trials.

This article was adapted from information provided by Mount Sinai Health System.

Army Vet Shares Personal Anecdotes of Resilience



U.S. Navy photo by Joseph Ross.

Army veteran Tonya Oxendine (left) speaks with Kelly Lee (right), director of plans and programs for SSP.

Army veteran Tonya Oxendine shared her life and work experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at a Strategic Systems Programs (SSP) event as a representative of the Wounded Warrior Project.

Oxendine, a former Army Command Sgt. Maj., was raised in poverty for most of her life. While growing up, she remembered seeing her mother scrape by to pay the electric bills – but Oxendine always found a way to turn her negative experiences into positive ones.

“Resilience,” she said to the SSP workforce. “I lived through poverty and pain but transformed that into resilience and purpose. Blow after blow, life kept feeling like a heavy weight fight, but I found out early that true courage is about choosing to rise every time you fall.”

She joined the Army, serving for more than 30 years, and frequently wore several hats, including being a master paratrooper, which involved jumping out of airplanes regularly. Although she had an outstanding military career, Oxendine admitted her time in service took a toll on her mental health.

“There were moments in my life where I didn’t know if I’d be here,” she said. “They say life at the top as a leader is lonely, and it certainly had its moments, but I also chose to isolate myself from people and not tell them that I wasn’t OK.”

She served in Afghanistan and other tours, which left her scarred with PTSD. Throughout her childhood and while in the Army, Oxendine also survived several instances of sexual assault. At the time, there weren’t many resources to help service members with that specific type of trauma, and it was an era when women weren’t always believed about their abuser. For Oxendine, these experiences began to affect her negatively.

She recalled having suicidal thoughts one day as she was driving back from work and crossing a bridge, but she reminded herself that her children needed her.

“That’s when I knew I needed to do something about this,” she said. “Taking my life would have changed my kids’ lives forever. I drove up to Ft. Belvoir and immediately sought help. As a leader and through my enduring painful experiences growing up, I became so used to putting my walls up and not accepting help – feeling like ‘if this is something I need to endure, then so be it because I didn’t want to go back to living poor.’”

She was diagnosed with PTSD and depression and said there were days she felt it was almost impossible to move. When one of her sons who is nicknamed “Bam” saw her struggling at home, he decided to put his career on hold to care for his mother.

“My son became my lifeline,” Oxendine said. “When he was born, one of the first things I said as I looked at him was ‘I got you,’ but in reality he had me. Bam put his career on hold to take care of me. He fed me, moved me close to the window so the sun would hit my face, and looked after me. My son taught me the value of support.”

As she began to learn to live with her PTSD and depression, Oxendine said the imaginary walls that people put up are not only barriers to keep others away, but also barriers that prevent someone from asking for help. Although she had been resilient and independent most of her life, especially as a military leader, she admitted asking for help was critical for her and her family.

“I am so grateful to be alive today for my boys,” she said. “I am thankful to the Wounded Warrior Project and to my family who supported me through one of my darkest chapters. Never forget that resilience is a continuous effort, but make no mistake, you must be intentional about it. You must be intentional in asking for help.”

Today, Oxendine is an advocate for the Wounded Warrior Project and champions mental health resources that are available to military veterans. Kelly Lee, the director of plans and programs for SSP, applauded Oxendine for her bravery, courage and inspirational story.

“We all have different traumas that affect us,” Lee said. “Asking for help, or providing it, is not a weakness. As military and civilian leaders, we must be mindful of how our employees are doing. Check in on each other and break down those barriers.”

To learn more about the Wounded Warrior Project, visit <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs>.

This article was adapted from an original article by Edvin Hernandez/Strategic Systems Programs.

Editor’s Note: *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Through the *Lens of Resilience*

How a Historian Confronts Vision Challenges



Charlie, Meaghan M. Kacmarcik's service dog, guides her through the Jones Building at Joint Base Andrews.

Although Meaghan M. Kacmarcik was stricken with a rare genetic eye disease that impaired her vision when she was 10, she has not let it stand in the way of her passion for history and her success.

Kacmarcik, 316th Wing deputy historian, was diagnosed with Stargardt disease, a genetic eye condition that she said has left her with “about 50 percent” sight, leaving her to rely mainly on her peripherals. She had routine visits to an optometrist for nearsightedness, for which she wore glasses, but the condition progressed to the point that she could not read a textbook or see the “big E” on an eyechart. While the disease usually “levels off” after childhood, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, there is currently no cure.

Growing up, she rejected the idea of attending special schools and stayed in public schools. After high school, she moved to Washington, DC, to attend George Washington University (GWU), where she graduated with a degree in history.

It was during her sophomore year of college that Kacmarcik met her service dog, Charlie, an English Labrador, who has been her sidekick navigating the world ever since. She first felt the need for a service dog after moving to the area to attend GWU and “a few close calls with the DC drivers.”

Charlie is a graduate of the Guide Dog Foundation, which trains dogs to assist people with visual impairments. Following a year of basic obedience training and three months of guide training, the dogs are paired with their humans for a two-week acclimation course, which is how Kacmarcik and Charlie met.



He was the biggest dog in the class and definitely the unruliest,” she said with a laugh.

Each workday, Charlie guides Kacmarcik from her apartment in DC to a Metro station, where they ride a train into Maryland before catching a bus to Joint Base Andrews.

An Early Love for History

Kacmarcik’s passion for history began at a young age—prior to her diagnosis with Stargardt disease—when she went on a field trip to a living history museum.

She later attended summer camps at the museum where participants were taught how to be reenactors, which led her to volunteer as a reenactor throughout middle school and high school and serve as a volunteer intern in college. “I just fell in love with history, even more being immersed in it,” she said.



Growing Passion in College Years

One of the last books she physically read before her vision became impaired was a memoir of the Holocaust. It was a historical period that piqued her interest in history the most as a child.

“Something about the horribleness of humanity but also people’s ability to overcome and rebuild their lives in the aftermath was really powerful and impressionable on a 10-year-old,” she said.

As Stargardt disease started to affect her, she said those stories resonated and helped her get through the tough moments.

“My disability is largely invisible, and I have worked hard to make it look like I was normal,” she said. “Getting a guide dog was the first time I was physically identifying myself as a visually impaired person, never mind something I was doing for my safety.”

After graduating from GWU, Kacmarcik joined the 316th Wing Historian office

Technology Assistance

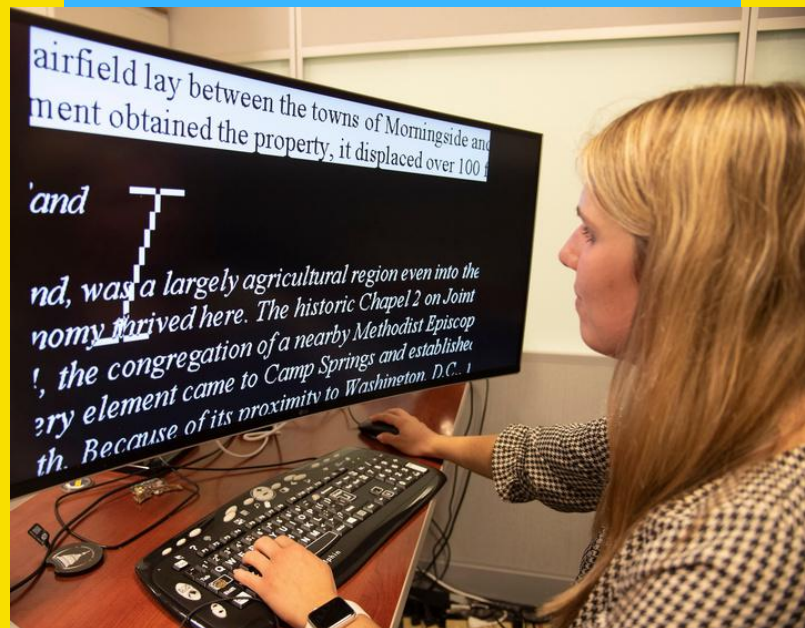
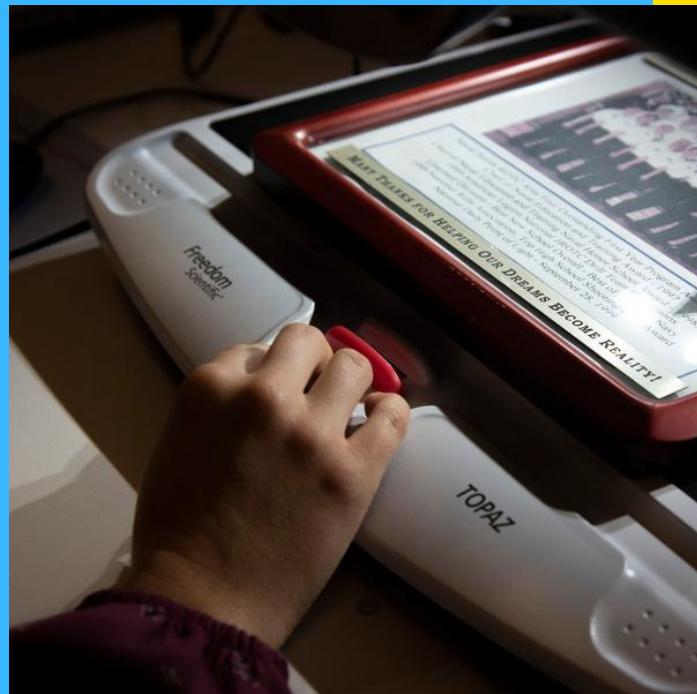
Throughout her academic and professional journey, technology has been a vital aid for Kacmarcik. In college, she began using Bookshare, a service with more than a million titles including textbooks and audio books.

However, it was critical for her not to just have a textbook but sometimes a specific edition of that book with footnotes and a different foreword. If that version wasn't available digitally, the spine of that actual book would have to be cut off and then scanned and reformatted for her.

“Sometimes that took a long time—two or three months,” she said.

In her role at the historian's office, the workload leans significantly toward reading reports and combing through archives. To read most text-based files, Kacmarcik uses ZoomText Fusion, an assistive technology program that magnifies text on a computer monitor.

She also uses Voice Dream Reader, which converts PDFs, textbooks, emails, news articles and more to speech. Scouring through the wing archives and old newspapers, she uses her phone or iPad to take pictures to view on a larger monitor.



Advice for Others

For others with disabilities, Kacmarcik offers three tips:

- **Build a support network.** She said she relies a lot on her parents—even though they are still in New Hampshire, she stays in touch, and they will “hop on a plane and come help me if I really need it.”
- **Learn to advocate for yourself.** “It took me a long time to learn to do that well into high school. I was not comfortable doing that for the longest time because I didn’t want to be pushy or anything like that.”
- **Find a passion.** “I’ve accepted my disability and moving past that with something that I’m passionate about. That’s why I’m so grateful that I have history—that will always be me rock.”

This article was adapted from an original article by Patrick Griffith/316th Wing.

Editor’s Note: The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.



Is Your Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

Benefits of Embracing Optimism



Image produced using Midjourney

Studies show that very few can follow through with losing weight, eating better, continuing a meditation or exercise regimen, or whatever else they want to do.

According to a recent study by The Ohio State University Max M. Fisher College of Business, only 9% of people who make New Year's resolutions follow through with them.

Yet many experts agree that there is one change that can bring many benefits, and it is one anyone can pursue. There are many advantages to becoming an optimist.

Optimism is a state of mind. We can all decide to embrace optimism instead of a pessimistic point of view.

Scott L. Rogers, a lecturer at University of Miami School of Law and director of the Mindfulness in Law Program, shared his thoughts about the many benefits of being an optimist.

How does optimism impact mental and emotional well-being in stressful situations?

Optimism shapes how individuals interpret situations, often reducing their perceived stressfulness. Moreover, when faced with a stressful situation, optimism can help navigate it more effectively, leading to better outcomes that enhance emotional well-being.

In what ways does an optimistic mindset contribute to personal and professional success?

Our reality often holds the potential for desirable and affirming outcomes in both our personal and professional lives. When challenges arise, how we perceive and respond to them largely depends on our perspective and outlook for the future. An optimistic mindset—a way of approaching our experiences that recognizes the opportunities within situations and believes in our ability to contribute to positive outcomes—enables us to more effectively identify and pursue paths to achieve those desired results.

Can optimism enhance physical health? If so, what mechanisms or habits might be involved?

Research suggests that approaching life's events with a more optimistic outlook can enhance physical health, partly due to the release of hormones and neurotransmitters that improve mood and provide protective effects on the body. Additionally, positive emotions associated with optimism may boost the immune system, making the body more resistant to infections, reducing the risk of chronic diseases, and offering protection against anxiety and depression. Importantly—and a source of optimism—optimism can be cultivated through practices such as mindfulness, gratitude, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and spending time with optimistic and supportive people.

How does optimism influence relationships and social connections with others?

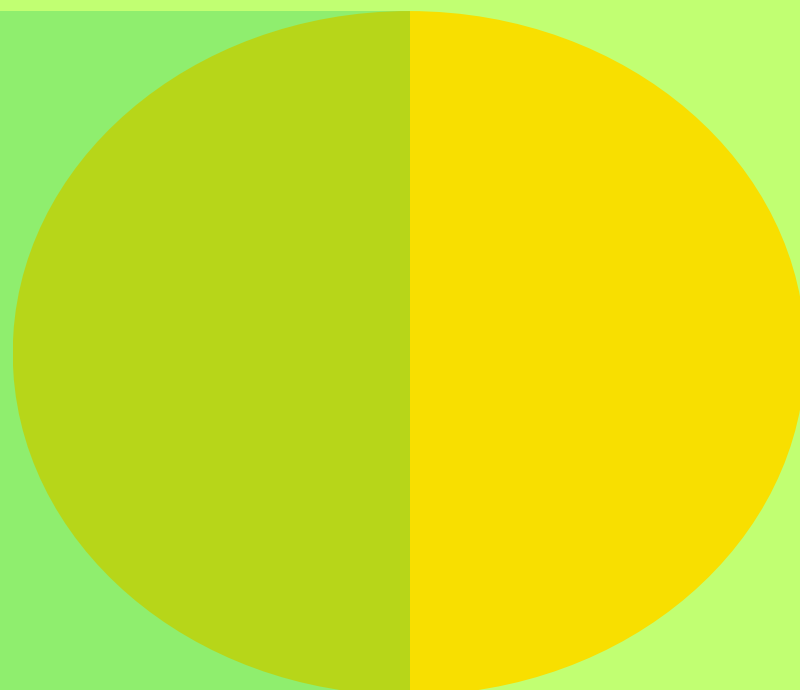
Optimism has been found to be an emotional contagion. Spending time with people who see the glass as half full—and feel empowered to refill it when it's empty—can positively influence one's outlook. Optimistic individuals tend to focus on solutions rather than dwelling on problems. Their hopeful and resilient approach not only models constructive ways of viewing the world but also helps reinforce optimistic thinking patterns while counteracting self-doubt and negative self-talk.

What role does optimism play in overcoming challenges and building resilience?

Because optimists tend to focus on the positive side of things, they are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for learning and growth. When faced with setbacks, they often perceive them as external and temporary rather than internal and permanent. Over time, these tendencies become reinforced, building resilience.

In closing, I offer two important reminders about optimism. The first is that all of us can develop a more optimistic mindset. The second is that change takes place over time; a gradual process where little shifts can be rewarding and a gift to both you and those with whom you work and love.

This article was adapted from information provided by the University of Miami. The original article was written by Barbara Gutierrez.



Join our community and movement for black
and brown girls and women with disabilities.

Showing up *unapologetically*
to reshape what
disability looks like



Illustration made using Midjourney

DivasWithDisabilities.org

RESILIENCE is evolving — again.

In the previous issue, we announced that *RESILIENCE* was changing from a magazine format — a grouping of several articles published at a single time — to a newsletter format.

Because of the speed at which information is available today, it made less and less sense for us to publish a traditional magazine, which can't be published until a group of articles are compiled and are ready to be published all at once.

With a newsletter published at Medium.com and emailed to subscribers, we are able to publish our individual articles any day we wish.

While we are going ahead with the newsletter, we have also decided to continue publishing a traditional magazine as well. That way, we will have the best of both worlds — a newsletter for speed and a magazine for the ability to bring everything together with more images and better design.

You'll now be able to find some of our articles at medium.com/resilience-news and a grouping of them on our website (RESILIENCEMag.com).



[SUBSCRIBE TO RESILIENCE](#)
[FOR FREE TODAY](#)