THIS ISSUE OF THE E-NETWORK IS DEDICATED IN MEMORY OF **MARY ZIMMERMAN, DR. ANTHONY WOLFE, DR. FAIZI SIDDIQI,** AND **DR. RAQUEL "ROCKY" ULMA**

cca e-network

newsletter of children's craniofacial association

2024: ISSUE 1

inside

SCAN THE QR CODE TO MAKE A DONATION!

Left to Right: **Tanisha, Jason, and Reina**

meet the chapmans

by Tanisha Pratt

October 1st 2022, we welcomed our long-awaited beautiful baby girl into the world. Reina's journey started early, filled with so many unknowns, and so many "wait and sees." Oddly enough, with me growing up as a cranio-kid myself, Reina's dad Jason and I had no idea what our future would hold. They had always asked if we wanted to run prenatal tests to check for Crouzon syndrome; our answer was always the same. "No thank you," we would say, "she'll be loved regardless." Our beautiful Reina was born with Crouzon syndrome, genetically inherited from me, however we soon...

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letter from the outreach director

"Another year has come and gone — I pray this one treats you better than the last and brings you closer to your aspirations, loved ones, safety, peace of mind and happiness.

The year is young, we are only a quarter of the way through — and SO very excited for all of the CCA programming and events in the near future!

This year is a special year for CCA; it marks the 35th Anniversary of CCA's inception. Thank you for being a member of our CCA community whether you have been with us since 1989

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empowering and giving hope to individuals and families affected by facial differences

chapmans, continued from the cover

found out her case was much more severe. Right after birth, Reina was quickly taken to the NICU due to respiratory distress. Once she was stabilized we found out she had feeding difficulties due to her Crouzon anatomy. This ultimately resulted in her needing a G-Tube placed that would serve as her main source of nutrition. After about a month long stay in **Brenner NICU**, we were home and boy, were we overjoyed!

Little did we know that was just the start of our journey with sweet our Reina. About two months after we came home, Reina had caught a simple cold, however we soon found out a simple cold would never be simple for our family. A cold meant an ER visit and hospitalization. More respiratory distress, more unknowns, more wait and sees. Through it all one thing kept us grounded: **we were together, happy, and we all have each other.** We were home again after a week long stay and a couple weeks later, Reina developed a post-viral ileus. Guess what? Another hospitalization.

Three months later, another hospitalization for more respiratory distress. We were home again, and her breathing only began to decline. We then found out she was beginning to develop pressure on her brain and optic nerve and would need surgery over the summer to relieve the pressure. Reina's extraordinary care team, her dad, and I, began to scramble. But wait, she can't breathe well when she's asleep and her daytime breathing is beginning to decline as well, what do we do? We couldn't take the risk of putting her under anesthesia without intervening urgently. So what would this mean? It was the scariest thing her dad and I would ever hear, but deep down knew would be best (and even began to advocate for it): Our sweet baby girl would need a trach to grow, thrive and breathe easy for the next eight to ten years. With this news, we would be looking at a two-to-three-month long hospitalization, and that's where CCA came in and saved us. We didn't plan, or budget, for this prolonged, unexpected stay and **Brenner Children's Hospital** of Winston Salem, NC, where she receives majority of her treatment, was forty five minutes away from home. Funding from CCA covered the entirety of the expenses we would be faced with from beginning to end. We are so forever grateful to have found a community of people who know what we experience, to rely and depend on, to turn to for advice and much more. **CCA became our family.** After a tracheotomy placement, one month of tracheotomy caregiver training for her dad and I, getting our home ready to bring back our sweet Reina, and one posterior vault expansion a month after

chapmans, continued from page 2

tracheotomy placement, we were finally home. **Reina is finally stable and she is thriving.** The tracheotomy was our greatest fear, but soon we realized it was life changing. Throughout this whole journey, Reina never stopped smiling, never stopped playing, and never stopped shining her light. Her favorite things to do are play with her toys, she loves to play "roll the ball" with her dad, playing musical instruments with him, loves Walmart trips and we all love going to see the animals and cool exhibits at the local science center. She loves tasting new foods, Disney/Pixar movies, **"Ms. Rachel's Songs for Littles"** on YouTube, **"Dora The Explorer,"** and absolutely adores learning new things and making up her own little games to play with her toys. We celebrated Reina's first birthday two months after we were discharged and had a short staycation to celebrate the rollercoaster of a summer we had all been through. With all of the ins and outs of the hospital, appointments, therapies, and having to keep Reina socially distanced from others to prevent respiratory illnesses for most of her first year of life, we didn't get much time to do things as a family. Reina's condition is finally stable and with that realization, we planned so many things! This past Christmas we visited a resort and Reina had a BALL. It was beautiful to finally see our kid, be a kid. This year, we plan to attend our first CCA picnic, that another local CCA family we were connected with will be hosting, and even possibly attend our first CCA Retreat! **To families starting out on this journey, we want you to know everything will be okay, we send you all of our love and blessings.**

letter from the OD, continued from the cover

or just now joining, we are grateful you are here. Each of you brings something uniquely special to the CCA community — ideas, advocacy, love, and so much more. Know that we see you and appreciate you!

So much of what we do at CCA is a team collaboration and would not be possible without involvement from people in the community, like you! Two of my favorite programs that fall in my department have been: **CCA Outreach Series** and **CCA's Speakers' Bureau**. In honor of our 35th anniversary, I would love to share their origin stories with you!

CCA OUTREACH SERIES

The outreach series started as a floating idea for about a year with Erica and me. We had so many variations of programming and media for CCA children and their parents/caregivers, but what about the adults? We talked about creating a platform for CCA adults to feature passions, professions, and "day in the life" videos, with the goal to showcase different industries and talents in our community. We hope that someone viewing the content could reach out and network if they, too, were interested in a similar industry or passion.

After a year of brainstorming, we began doing interviews with individuals from all over the country. Erica and I took turns doing the videos. Our earliest videos were with:

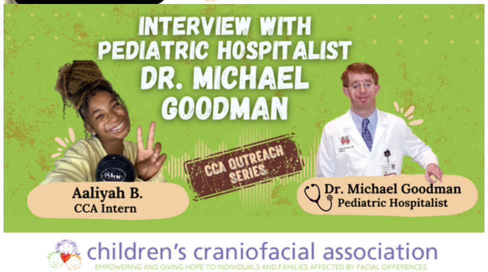
> TikToker and college student- Nathan Cajina

> Author and Business Owner - Hannah Setzer

> Division 1 Wrestler - Nick Raimo

We've since expanded in to release roughly 1-2 videos a month with our intern, **Aaliyah Booker**, as the host of the series. To date we have published 26 interviews with many in the pipeline to be released in the coming month!

Click through a few of the videos in our Outreach Series below:



SPEAKERS BUREAU

The Speakers' Bureau is one of my proudest yet constantly evolving projects! It was presented as an idea from a former board member prior to me starting with CCA and has since become one of the most popular programs under our #ChooseKind umbrella. We often have teachers request speakers every year for the class because they understand and see the impact on their students and those who attend, after hearing a CCA speaker.

As with any good thing, the program itself has grown. We've made improvements since its launch in 2018. The purpose of the Bureau is to create a platform for CCA Kids and Adults to share their passions, interests, professions and personal stories in front of an audience. The Bureau provides training and guidance, equipping our speakers with the resources and guidelines to build on their current public speaking skills, while also providing avenues to educate the general public through speaking engagements at schools, organizations, clubs, and corporations. The Bureau also creates a community of like minded individuals for networking.

As many of you know, we took some time last year with the help of the **Ananda Foundation** to improve the programming to honor, respect, and bring attention to the time, skills, and efforts of our speakers by creating a mandatory

letter from the OD

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honorarium for every speaker and reimbursement for travel cost.

Even though I would say the Speakers' Bureau is probably one of our most effective #ChooseKind programs, as It bridges the gap between the CCA community and the general public, that said, it is probably also the most misunderstood program. Let's break it down into commonly asked questions about the program:

WHO CAN JOIN?

- Anyone who is interested in using their presence and voice to educate and bring awareness around facial differences.
- Those who are interested in building their public speaking skills through speaking engagements.

WHAT DOES THE SPEAKERS' BUREAU DO?

- Provides a platform to create recognition on your speaking abilities while offering opportunities to use your skills to further the message of acceptance and awareness of facial differences.
- Displays your profile on our website and connects you to speaking requests received by CCA that match your interests.

IS THERE A FEE TO BE ON THE SPEAKERS' BUREAU?

- No! We will cover any necessary fees to become a member such as background checks and any fees for the cost of a speaking session will be covered by the organization where you are speaking.

HOW DO YOU JOIN?

Apply online at:
ccakids.org/speakers-bureau-process/

- Complete the training videos, audition, and all steps in the link to be considered.

DOES EVERYONE GET ACCEPTED?

- If you do not pass the criteria initially because of your audition presentation, we will provide feedback and resources to try again!
- All those 18 years or older require a background check. For minors, their accompanying parent will need to pass a background check.

HOW WILL I GET PAIRED WITH A SPEAKING SESSION?

- We pair speaking sessions as we receive requests. Therefore, it is not always guaranteed. However, you are welcome to reach out to local organizations, schools, etc. and share what our program is and we will take care of the setting up process--to get you speaking!

I ALREADY SPEAK TO SCHOOLS ON MY OWN, WHAT IS THE ADVANTAGE FOR ME TO JOIN THE BUREAU?

- That is amazing! We are so excited that you are sharing your story and building understanding around facial differences! The advantage of partnering with CCA is: (1) we will feature you on our website which can give you an official stamp that can be presented when you make new connections with organizations, (2) you will be part of a larger community of like minded individuals, (3) we will work like your event manager to find you speaking opportunities that may fit your interests or locality, (4) every session will guarantee you compensation!

HOW DO I GET PAID?

- When a school or organization reaches out to CCA for a speaker, they are required to pay an honorarium and travel. View the break down on our website here:

ccakids.org/speakers-bureau-2/

- We will then pay you after the completion of the session like a contract employee where you will receive a percentage of the honorarium (60% as a member) and the entirety of the travel fee.
- The portion of the honorarium fee that CCA retains (40%) is reinvested into the Speakers' Bureau programming and a financial assistance fund to cover fees for Title 1 schools and organizations that are unable to pay, so that you, the speaker, will still be paid for your time, effort, and skills.

We are currently renewing previous memberships and welcoming new ones! Please reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

Thanks,

Khadija Moten
CCA's Outreach Director

gingertown 2023 raises $35,355.91 for CCAKids

by Christine Andler, CCA's Director of Development

The annual Gingertown is one of the biggest gingerbread house events in Texas and all proceeds benefit Children's Craniofacial Association. Gingertown brings together talent from more than 25 local design, engineering, and construction firms in Dallas/ Fort Worth for a live gingerbread building competition and exhibition to help spread joy and hope during the holidays at Dallas's premier shopping destination, NorthPark Center. Millions of people nationally and internationally visit the Center each year.

In 2023, the theme was "Moulin Rouge" and showcased the beautiful streets of Paris! The night began with a speech from our **Executive Director, Erica Klauber,** thanking everyone for making the effort to attend and fundraise for CCA.

In total, the event raised $35,355.91 that will go directly to CCA. We are so grateful for all those that came out to support us and wanted to especially thank **Nancy Nasher** and her children for attending the build, **RJ Ressig** and his staff for all they do to make this a huge success each year, and last but not least, **the Kimberlin family, The Greer Family** and **the Alvey family** for participating in the build and building the CCA kid's lipstick shop gingerbread house! This build was one of our favorites yet and we cannot wait to see what is in store for 2024!

NorthPark Center
in association with
DMS Architects Charitable Foundation

DATE: April 1st, 2024

PAY TO THE ORDER OF: Children's Craniofacial Association

$ $35,355.91

Thirty-Five Thousand, Three Hundred Fifty-Five and 91/100 DOLLARS

FOR: Gingertown Dallas 2023

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financial assistance testimonial

by Lauren Marlow

This handsome, energetic, animal-loving young man is our precious Chase. Chase has been beating the odds since he was born at just 24 weeks and weighing in at 0 pounds, 14 ounces.

Chase has an identical twin brother, Conner. The only thing not identical between the boys is that Chase was born with Hemifacial Microsomia (HFM.) HFM is a condition in which one side of the face is underdeveloped. For Chase, his right ear, ear canal, and cheekbone are affected.

As a result of HFM, Chase was born with an ear difference, called Microtia/Atresia. In layman's terms, Chase's right ear and ear canal are underdeveloped. Chase has been proudly rocking his "baby ear," while we wait for him to get bigger and healthier to be able to handle major reconstructive surgery. During this time, Chase faced questioning, criticizing comments, and bullying.

For ten years, we had been waiting for Chase to be big enough to undergo rib graft reconstruction. In December of 2021, we were finally given the go ahead. Once given the go for surgery, through the world of social media, we discovered advances in technology which led to alternative routes. This was totally new for us, as given the rarity of this condition, the staff at our local facilities weren't familiar or able to offer anything beyond the rib graft.

We spent hours upon hours researching, analyzing, joining multiple support groups/chats, meeting and consulting with surgeons all across the world to find the surgeon Chase deserves. **Dr. John Reinisch**, in Beverly Hills, California was Chase's perfect match. The surgery was considered out-of-network for our insurance company, so we faced giant financial hurdles to pay for the procedure. In addition to paying for the surgery, we had to travel across the country from Florida to California and remain there for recovery. Thanks to the support of our family, friends, and the generosity of Children's Craniofacial Association, the burden of travel expenses was alleviated and allowed us to focus on our family.

Chase was able to have reconstructive surgery at the beginning of June 2022. The scars are fading and the skin is healing more and more every day. Last week, Chase and I were sitting together and Chase says, "Mom, none of these kids noticed my ear wasn't all healed." Chase had become used to his baby ear being the topic of conversation everywhere he went. He was relieved for the first time in his life to not have to explain anything to anyone right off the bat.

In just a few weeks, for the first time in his life, Chase will walk into school with the confidence to take on the world.

cca kid

meet kacper

My name is Kacper Lukasiewicz and I'm 12 years old. I was born in Poland. I came here with my family because all the doctors in Poland couldn't help me. I was born with Goldenhar syndrome and a heart defect.

When I was two weeks old, I had my first cardiac catheterization and they placed me on a tracheostomy tube. I had the tube for seven long years. During my short life, so far I've had four open heart surgeries, many cardiac catheterizations, jaw reconstruction and many plastic surgeries. We stopped counting. I still need more surgeries. I also have a small battery in my body which helps my heart work properly. It's called a "pacemaker." I am also partially deaf. My parents called me a "miracle baby."

I spend a lot of time in hospitals, but my family is always with me and helping me recover quickly.

I like school, I am in 6th grade now. I have wonderful teachers and classmates. I like my teachers because they always make learning very easy and fun. My favorite subjects in school are Math, Gym, and Recess. I like reading books. My favorite series are "Dog Man" and "Cat Kid Comic Club" by Dav Pikey. I like to build Lego blocks and play video games as well.

After school, my favorite activities during the summer are swimming, riding bikes, playing outside and helping my mom with her garden. I live close to the beach and during the summer, my family and I love spending time there. My older brother, **Filip,** loves fishing and he teaches me many ways to fish. Sometimes we go fishing together and I catch bigger fish than him. Unfortunately, he started college in Florida and we can't spend a lot of time together.

I love to travel. I have been to many beautiful places in the USA. I visit my relatives and grandma in Poland very often. I like Polish food and exploring many historic places over there as well. My favorite vacation spots are RV campgrounds in Key West, Florida. I go to almost every school break with my family and my dog named Coconut.

In June 2023, I attended my first CCA Family Retreat in Minneapolis. It was a wonderful time for me and my family. I made many new friends and met many incredible people. The Family Retreat helped me feel better and less stressed with my health issues. I know I always have family support. They love me unconditionally, that's why I am able to be much stronger, smarter, and feel safe.

ccasupersib

My name is **Filip Lukasiewicz**, I am 18 years old and I have the pleasure of being **Kacper's** older brother.

I work part time as a kitchen installer with, and for, my dad's company, and I enjoy a wide plethora of things. I like fishing, historic cars, and video games. I like spending time outside with my family, camping, and traveling. We like to travel to Poland and visit our families.

I like the sun and the beach. I am currently an undergraduate student at **Lynn University** and plan to get my bachelor's degree in Marketing. All of these opportunities that I have been given and received are all in part to my younger brother, Kacper.

I was born in the United States but moved back to Poland when I was younger for several years. During those times my younger brother, Kacper, was born and things changed. Opportunities for kids like my brother in Poland at the time were not readily available like they are in the United States. When my parents found out Kacper would have a fair chance at getting treatment and help in the US, they didn't hesitate and immediately decided to move. Kacper has had many surgeries since the time we moved here and has gotten help that he would have never received in Poland.

I visit him in the hospital all the time and supply balloons for him, he loves them. Kacper is a wonderful brother and friend. Kacper has a unique skill: it is how fast he socializes with people (no matter the age). He is always happy and never complains.

I am grateful to have Kacper as a brother. I love him so much and miss him when I am in college. I am also very grateful he is getting the help he deserves and the opportunities that he is receiving. Without my little brother I would not have the opportunities, and bright future that I have ahead of me, and most importantly I wouldn't be able to enjoy time with my family and what life has to offer for us all.

a very 80's christmas gala raises over $10,000 for CCAKids!

by Christine Andler, CCA's Director of Development

On Thursday December 7th, 2023 in San Antonio, TX, **Heather and JJ Henson** and their companies **HHI Home Inspections & Pest Control** and **Sherwood Tax Solutions LLC** hosted A Very 80's Christmas Gala benefitting CCA. There was a silent auction, raffle and a live show by the very rad and well-known **Spazmatics**. It was truly a night of customer appreciation and fun had by all supporting our organization. We are so grateful to Heather and JJ Henson and their entire team for all the hard work they put in to raise over $10,000 for CCA!

A special thank you to all the sponsors: **HHI Home Inspections & Pest Control, Mission City Arbor Group, Marc Flores APEX Smart Home Protection, The Esteem Group, Champion Roofing and Contracting Inc., Trinity Water Solutions, RJ Financial Group, KC Walker-Rodriguez Fil-Am Realty, Moe's Tx Tavern, Dr. Drake's Sleep Solutions, RE Construction, Murray Plumbing, Pinnacle Foundation Repair San Antonio, Aces Ace, Sherwood Tax Solutions LLC, Your Warranty Girl- Super SHAN Antonio**

upcoming events

MONTHLY at 7pm CST
Apr. 3rd, May 1st, Jun. 5th, Jul. 10th, Aug. 7th, Sept. 4, Oct. 2nd
Virtual

CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP
REGISTER HERE

MONTHLY at 7:30pm CST
Apri. 22nd, May 20th, Jun. 17th, Jul. 22nd, Aug. 19th, Sept. 23, Oct. 21st
Virtual

ADULTS AND ALUMN GROUP
REGISTER HERE

MAY 1st, 2024
Virtual

SPECIAL EDITION **CAREGIVER WORKSHOP:**
THE BEING OF DOING: DECREASING STRESS BY UNDERSTANDING THE WHY
REGISTER HERE

MAY 9th - 10th, 2024
Dallas, TX

ELIZABETH TOON EVENT: 18TH ANNUAL CONCERT & SHOOTOUT BENEFITING CCA

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MAY 13th - 19th, 2024
Global

FACE EQUALITY WEEK
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JUNE 27-30, 2024
Baltimore, MD | Hyatt Regency
Baltimore Inner Harbor
300 Light Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21202

34TH ANNUAL FAMILY RETREAT AND EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM

REGISTRATION IS CLOSED!

JULY
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ACCEPTING NOMINATIONS FOR:
EXCELLENCE IN ADVOCACY AWARD NIGHT OF THE DAVID ROCHE AWARD
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SEPTEMBER
Global

20TH YEAR CCA OBSERVES:
SEPTEMBER AS CRANIOFACIAL ACCEPTANCE MONTH
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SEPTEMBER 26-28, 2024
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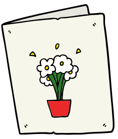

meet emma

Unique. A word used to describe me, as far back as I can remember. I hated the word. With a passion. All I wanted to be was "normal." I would look at the other kids with their "normal" faces, their cluelessness at what a hospital was or how disgusting medication can be and I would just close my eyes and wish for a superpower to make me like one of them.

I'm **Emma**. I'm an Irish gal and I'm 31 years old. I am also told I'm the only person in my country born with both jaws missing. There was no indication I would be different, so when I was born, naturally my parents were surprised and trying to work out what was wrong with me as I couldn't breathe. When I was only a few hours old, I had a tracheostomy inserted to help me breathe and then I had scan after scan to determine what was exactly wrong.

I essentially became a guinea pig, a Rubix cube… you name it… a mystery for the doctors to unravel and every time they thought they hit the nail on the head, the nail just sprung back out and we were back to square one.

My first major surgery was when I was 19 months old, I had a rib graft to place two ribs where my jaws should be. It was televised and a big sensation. I don't remember though; I just hear these stories from my Mum who gave up her entire career to look after me. I needed 24/7 care.

I made no sound, so you couldn't tell if I was choking unless looking at me. With a tracheostomy, I needed suctioning regularly and I also took 8 plus hours to eat one meal. It was a full-time job and when I see my Mum today, I see a superhero who despite spending over a decade training to be a Barrister (senior lawyer), gave it all up in a second to care for me. My Dad, a doctor, was also in the middle of his residency and trying to do all the hours that were required while helping my Mum at home. The point is, growing up I was pretty much housebound.

Once I went to school, I expected everyone to be as sunny as I felt. I had only experienced sunshine and love. However, the reality was that the real world can be cruel, especially to those who look different. Throughout my childhood, I had surgery after surgery to try and build the rib graft into a jaw, make my face longer, etc. I've lost count of how many surgeries I had. The school would finish for the year and my summer was spent having surgeries and recovering and then back to school. It was this same routine for my entire childhood. I had my tracheostomy removed when I was 12 years old - yay!

When I hit high school, that's when the real mental pain of looking different kicked in. I remember turning 13 years old and being vividly aware of how toxic teen girls can be from that age. I was severely

bullied. Every single day was mental and emotional torture. I couldn't focus, my grades slipped and I became severely depressed and considered ending it all. **Luckily, I was seeing the hospital clinical psychologist** to help me make important decisions regarding surgeries. I then began to open up about the bullying to her, and she went into the school to ask what I was doing to deserve the emotional abuse at school and when I went home, online, with constant hate messages. The school couldn't come up with anything because the fact was that I had done nothing. My only crime was looking different.

I remember when I turned 16, I was told by surgeons that I needed to have the rib grafts removed as they were no longer working and I needed artificial TMJs. That surgery was brutal, they took the rib out, and the joints didn't fit, so I was left on a ventilator for 10 days while new ones were made and shipped over. By the time the surgery was finished and I was back to school, I had half a shaved head, was super swollen, and just felt awful about the way I looked. The fact that I looked different gave the bullies the chance to assume that I was weak and vulnerable and unfortunately, because all kids at that age want to fit in, I was an easy target. Therefore they managed to destroy me. I became a shell of a person and moved schools hoping that would help and it did slightly. I honestly had no hope for the future. I didn't think I would achieve anything. **However, the universe had another plan for me.** I achieved the grades I needed to get into my dream University undergrad program and I spent the next four years growing up (one of the years I studied abroad in Upstate New York). My BA was in 'American History and Politics.' I am fascinated with American history, culture, and politics - how much has changed since the 1700s. I had no idea what I would do for a job after but that didn't matter because at the time I was just trying to find my footing in the world.

I did have to extend my degree by a year, as I obtained an infection on my left artificial TMJ which needed to be taken out, leaving the space empty for 6 months and then a new joint put back in. Unfortunately, I developed facial palsy on the left side as a result of this surgery and that put a further dent into my confidence. Everything else was a success.

I still struggled with 'looking different' as by the time we reach university, we start to naturally date and socialize. I struggled. Dating for me was like trying to learn PhD level physics (never going to happen) and socializing was hard as people saw my face first before giving my personality a chance.

I graduated and worked in retail for a year to save up before moving to Vancouver, Canada. Before moving, I had a major life-changing surgery. I hated the way I looked and begged my surgeon to do something, so he finally agreed to replace the artificial TMJs with a different shape and try and change my face shape. My parents were terrified. We had huge arguments over it because of the risks. **But I had a gut feeling it would work. And I was right. This surgery was like a gift in that it**

gave me confidence I never had before. It pushed me to follow my plan to move abroad and start fresh.

I didn't have a plan about Vancouver - I just knew I wanted to take the chance with this potential job I was offered by someone over there. When I first moved there, I actually started to work on TV sets of some very popular shows such as "Supernatural," "Flash," "Arrow," "DC Legends," etc. I couldn't believe it, I was actually on the sets of these major shows - "Supernatural" I had been watching since I could remember - and because I was doing such a good job, I kept getting asked back. That to me was mind-blowing and helped boost my confidence. However, on one of the shows, I experienced bullying by a senior member - my face was targeted. I tried to ignore it for six months and eventually, I reported it. The next day I was fired. Ironically, that show came under investigation for misconduct and was canceled promptly after the investigation concluded. Can you say Karma?

After working on all the shows, I went back to the original plan of working with this particular person. I very quickly realized I had entered a very toxic and emotionally abusive work situation where I wasn't safe. My escape plan? Apply to do a master's back home in Ireland and run. I never thought I would be accepted into one of the top universities, best programs, and just generally do a post grad degree. The girl who was called stupid throughout high school had of course absorbed some of this into my inner dialogue. I remember getting the acceptance email and I just couldn't believe it. **I was in!**

I very quickly packed my bags and promptly left Canada to go home.

My master's was the best educational experience of my life. I proved to my inner dialogue that I AM SMART. My master's was 'American Studies' aka politics, history, culture and literature. My final research MA thesis was called 'The Crime of Being Black: Mass Incarceration from 1980 to Current Day.' I loved every moment, soaking in this challenge and knowing I could do it. I graduated top of my class; something my 13-year-old self never would have believed if she had been told this would happen 12 years later.

When I graduated with my MA, I was twiddling my thumbs wondering what next? Well, there was that chapter called COVID. The whole world shut down. No one was hiring and we were all stuck. It gave me a chance to breathe, though. I had time to think about what I wanted. **My answer? Adventure.**

September 2020 rolled around, and the world has just opened up and that allowed me to hop on a plane and move to Cairo, Egypt. I know, that was a super random choice. Backstory - after I finished my MA in 2019, I went there on a trip and I loved it so much. I made so many friends, one of which worked for one of the top marketing agencies in North Africa. Marketing had been the area I had worked in on the side for the last few years. My friend convinced me to come work with them. I applied, and after giving a presentation, I was accepted. Tickets booked, parents jaws on the floor when I told them, and my excitement for adventure in such a different place was high. Living in Cairo, was a chaotic beautiful adventure. I loved my job- one day I would be doing

cca adult

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photoshoots by the Great Pyramids and the next day I would be in some oasis capturing Egyptian local culture. Or another day, working on a massive Ramadan TV campaign. Each day was different, never a dull moment. Film festivals, influencer trips, clients in different areas - I was learning so many skills. **I grew up over there. I became the independent adult I always wanted to be.** I learned to advocate for myself and I learned this new superpower - giving ZERO CARES about what anyone thought. I found myself to be respected because of this new confidence and it showed me that the 'fake it till you make it' phrase is correct.

Cairo was also filled with meeting so many amazing lifelong friends. I found it to be healing in that sense too, **I started to learn boundaries. I started dating. I realized that I am attractive, and I won't be alone forever like I assumed when I was 13.** After nearly two life-changing years, I moved home to Dublin to pursue a job in the Irish market. Everything was going great until January 2023, when I found out that I had an infection on my right artificial TMJ. My original surgeon in Glasgow was now living abroad and no one in Ireland was trained specially for this surgery, as there is only a small number worldwide skilled in this. That meant finding a new surgeon in the UK and there were only three. No one wanted me at first because of my complicated case, however, I finally was taken on. December 5th, 2023 after taking very strong daily antibiotics 4x a day, I finally had the joint removed. I now have to wait a period before the new joint is inserted. I am scared for sure. Every surgery I have now is riskier because of the scar tissue and the fact I have facial palsy on the left side that could get worse or I could get one on the right side. But at this point, I just want this nightmare to be over. I want to get on with my life. You'd also be pleased to know I haven't let this stop my dating life - still dating - still putting myself out there with the aura of zero cares about others' opinions.

Of course, I still struggle every day with mental health. I go to weekly therapy and I am determined to heal so I don't pass on any generational trauma. While I am technically off work, I'm focusing on freelance social media, learning Italian, and taking a Public Relations diploma course as I think I want to enter PR instead of my usual title 'Senior Social Media Account Manager.' I'm also focussing a lot on my online presence - feel free to follow me!

Instagram: Emma19Cassidy
Tik Tok: LifeChatsWithEmma

When I'm not planning my next career or adventure step, I am often found socializing with my friends. I now have this amazing inner circle that I love dearly. I also love to play tennis and watch TV shows. Most importantly, I love spending time with my dog (Nellie) and of course my parents… I am an only child but we count Nellie as one so…

In conclusion, at 31 years old with all the traveling, adventures, mistakes, trauma, and struggles I have been through - I still haven't found the secret to life. But I do know this: **Life gets better no matter what. You WILL find your friends who love you for you. The darkness WILL pass. You DESERVE to live and you SHOULD take up space in the room. You're just as worthy as any other "normal" person out there.**

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